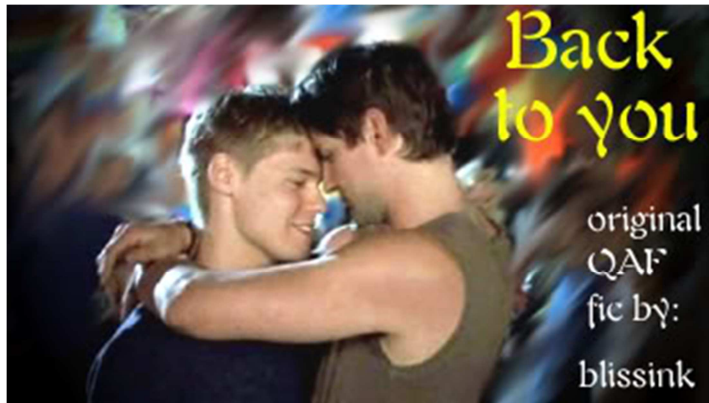


# Back To You

by blissink



**Genre:** AU – S1 happened in cannon. The others seasons differ.

**Summary:** Justin wakes up from the bashing with no memories – not just of the bashing but of his entire senior year. Jennifer decides it's best for everyone if they keep it that way and moves Justin and Molly to New Jersey. 5 years later Justin is an up-n-coming artist living in Brooklyn. His life is good and he's content. Then a call for help from someone he doesn't remember brings him back to Pittsburgh. Will he remember? And if he does... what will happen?

## Chapter 1

*"I'm sleeping in my bed.... With your silhouette..." (Back to You by J. Mayer)*

I wake up from the dream the same way I always do – sheen of cold perspiration coating my limbs, a slight headache pushing against my forehead and an overwhelming feeling of loss. I take a deep breath and hold it as long as I can before letting the air hiss through my clenched teeth.

It's the same as always... I'm with him – chestnut hair, hazel-green eyes – and we're in a jeep driving way too fast... but I feel exhilarated instead of scared. And there's some old song playing on the radio something slow and cheesy that so doesn't go with this Indie 500 driving. And then suddenly we're not in the car – we're on a huge empty concrete space with no one else around and he's swinging me around and kissing me. He's got an arm wrapped around my waist and his lips are on mine and I feel warm and light and.... Euphoric.

And then I hear a loud, hard CRACK – like something driving full force into something else - and wake up like this.

I take another long breath and shift onto my side, curling into the fetal position and willing myself to calm down.

And that's when I hear the front door slide open.

He was early.

I try not to smile as I lay there with my eyes closed, the fluffy duvet on top of my half naked body. I hear things being shifted on the dresser and drawers open and close as he undresses.

Then he curls his body into mine, molding his front against my back. I can feel his hard dick push up against my thigh – just under my ass cheek. I fight to pretend I'm still asleep. It's so much more rewarding to let him "wake" me.

He grinds into me lightly, slowly and kisses the back of my neck. His hands reach around, sliding over my bare belly and then his fingers dance around the waistband of my underwear. He finds the tip of my rock hard cock and I feel his lips part in a smile against my skin.

"Justin...?"

I hesitate but as his hand slips under the waistband and grazes my cock I smile and whisper his name in return.

"Aiden."

I turn around and he captures my lips and I groan as his tongue slides into my mouth.

And then the phone shrills to life from the glass and metal night side table.

We both freeze; lips inches apart and my eyes flutter open to find his caramel brown ones mimicking the look of concern and confusion on my face.

"It's after midnight," he states.

It rings again.

"Are you expecting a call? Work?"

He shakes his head.

I sigh. This can't be good. I roll back around and reach for the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Is Justin Taylor there please?"

“This is Justin.” I don’t recognize the voice but the tone is urgent and serious and it instantly makes me nervous. My heart starts to race.

“Justin!” she sounds relieved. “It’s Mel. Melanie Marcus.”

“I’m sorry who?” I furrow my brow. I should know this name. At least I can tell she thinks I should.

“Excuse me,” she clears her throat and her voice drops an octave in disappointment. “My name is Melanie Marcus and I’m... a lawyer in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania.”

My gut clenches. I feel my grip on the phone tighten. My heart accelerates once again.

“Pittsburgh,” I repeat. No one – and I mean no one – has mentioned that city to me in almost 5 years.

Aiden catches my eye and pulls himself up on his elbow staring at me intently. He knows the significance behind that city.

“Yes.”

I swallow and ask the inevitable question. “Did we... Do we know each other?”

There’s a small pause. “We did.”

Aiden touches my chest lightly, comfortingly.

Melanie clears her throat. “Justin... Mr. Taylor... I’m sorry to bother you and I hope my calling you isn’t too... unwelcome. And I truly apologize about the late hour. I...”

“Just say it,” I encourage her clearly reading the hesitation in her tone. “I’m fine now. I have been for years. Despite the memory loss.”

“Justin... The man who bashed you....”

“Chris Hobbs.”

I try not to focus on the surprise on Aiden’s face.

“He’s done it again,” Melanie Marcus tells me and I suddenly can’t take a breath. “And I need your help to make sure that this time, it’s treated like what it is - a hate crime.”

## Chapter 2

*"I'm so good at forgetting.... And I quit every game I play..." (Back to You by J Mayer)*

Aiden's staring at me trying as hard as he cannot to look upset or worried, but I know he's both. We've been together for almost 3 years. We've lived together for the last 3 months. I know him better than he knows himself.

"It's fine," I say as I throw a pair of jeans into the open duffle bag on my bed.

"I still think you should tell Jennifer," he explains.

I smile at his concern. "I know, but she'll just talk me out of it."

"Maybe that's a good thing," he counters. "Maybe you shouldn't go back."

"Why not?" I question and he shrugs. "See, I've been asking my mother since she moved us away. Why? And she never has an answer."

"Yes she does," he argues. "She told you. The memories are too painful."

"Maybe for her," I walk across our ebony stained hardwood floors to the bathroom to grab my toothbrush. "But I have no memories, remember?"

He thinks about that for a long moment running his hand through his chestnut hair. His caramel eyes land on me again. "You have memories. Good ones. Jennifer just doesn't want you to have bad ones."

I nod and zip up my duffle bag, pulling it off the bed and dropping it on the floor. I turn and look at him sitting in the white leather Barcelona chair across the bedroom area of our loft. The early morning sunlight is angled across his chiseled torso and makes his chestnut hair glow a little. I cross the small distance and lean down and kiss his forehead.

"If remembering the bashing means I can remember the rest of that year too then I want to remember," I tell him softly and honestly as I run my hand through his hair. "There must have been good times in there. And I deserve to have them back."

He remains silent and his furrowed brow clearly means he doesn't agree with my rationale. Still, he follows me toward the front door. I hesitate by the simple brass hook where the key to his car hangs. "Are you sure Aid?"

"Yeah definitely," he says calmly and smiles motioning toward the keys to his Mercedes Kompressor.

"But what are you going to do without it?"

"Take the subway," he smirks. "Maybe I'll get hit on by some hot little artist."

I smirk back at that and grab him around the waist. "Lightening doesn't strike twice."

We kiss - it's long and feels somehow needy.

"I should head out. It's a long drive," I whisper.

Aiden nods but kisses me again and this time it's completely needy. I pull back. "Whoa. I'll be gone two days. Three tops."

"I know," he admits softly. "But... I'll miss you."

I kiss him again and smile.

I close the door behind me and it makes the usual sliding sound followed by the usual metal clank as Aiden slips the lock into place behind me. I realize I'll miss that sound as much as I'll miss him.

When I started shopping for a place to live, I knew I wanted a loft because it could easily be a live/work space. My mom, who had gotten her realtor's license in Jersey after we moved, had taken me to a bunch of different locations, mostly new developments in Chelsea and Soho. But they all felt... Generic. But then I saw an ad for this place in Williamsburg. An old candy factory. And when my mother opened that metal sliding door... a warm wave washed over me and I was sold.

It felt like home.

She wasn't convinced. She tried everything to convince me it wasn't right. The age of the building, the cost of the place, the amount of renovations, the location, the view... but I knew I had to have it. A peace washed over me every time I slid that door opened and stepped inside.

Eventually she made the offer for me and it was accepted and I moved in. I let Aiden move in a few months later.

As I walk to the alley where the Mercedes is parked and load my bag in the trunk I let his face float into my mind. He's a great guy. Kind and generous and funny and smart and hot. I have no idea why he puts up with me.

I haven't been as good to him as he's been to me.

We met on the subway the exact same day I was going to have my first New York gallery exhibit. He was in a suit that was slightly too big and fidgeting relentlessly. He looked as nervous as I was.

Our eyes locked and he smiled crookedly. I smiled back.

"My suit doesn't fit very well."

"It's not too bad," I assured him. "Besides, it's Prada. Anyone with good taste will overlook the longer sleeves."

He laughed. "Are you a label whore?"

I wrinkled my brow just a little and then threw the smile back on my face. “No. Just something I picked up... somewhere.”

He told me his name and that he was headed to an interview at the Deutsch ad agency. I told him that the first thing he needs to sell in advertising is himself so he had to walk into that interview like he owned the agency. He seemed to like that and told me it was good advice. He asked me if I was in advertising.

I told him about my art show. I wished him luck as he got off the subway and chastised myself for not asking for his number. Turned out he felt the same way and, after showing up at my show that night, he asked me for my number.

That was about 3 years ago. And though we were still together, the relationship had had its ups and downs – mostly because of me. I was way more aloof about my emotions than Aiden was. I couldn’t just blurt out the “I love yous” like he did. In fact, I think I’d written it once in an email and that was about it.

It wasn’t that I didn’t... I think I loved him. I mean I felt strongly for him. I didn’t know anyone else I would rather be with than him. I just... I was guarded.

My therapist told me that this was normal for attack victims – especially ones with memory loss. I realized – and luckily Aiden did too – that she was right. I mean, I still felt.... Defective. There was 12 months of my life I would never get back. There were people – like this Melanie Marcus woman and God knows who else – who I would never be able to remember.

It’s hard to give your heart to someone when you feel like you’re not whole. And I didn’t feel whole.

But Aiden had stuck around anyway. And he didn’t care that I had some sexual... issues. He wasn’t the first person I was with – I’d given head to a guy at a club in Chelsea about 7 months after we moved to New Jersey – during the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester at New York Institute of Art. And I’d fucked a guy at a party too about a year after that.

But Aiden had been a top when I met him and we didn’t actually have intercourse for almost 3 months because whenever it got that far and he tried topping me I froze or freaked out. Yeah that wasn’t at all embarrassing.

Even the therapist didn’t know what that was about since my attack hadn’t been sexual. I’d asked my mother about my sexual history in Pittsburgh – because I didn’t know if I’d had sex prior to the attack. I mean, it felt like I did... I seemed to know what I was doing – but that conversation didn’t go well.

My mother clammed up instantly and got a pained look on her face and when I pushed her she finally said. “You weren’t a virgin. I found that out by mistake and you almost disowned me.”

I wanted to ask her if I had a boyfriend or if I’d been in a relationship or what but what was the point? If she knew she didn’t want to tell me.

My father hadn't moved with Molly, Mom and I to New Jersey since they were divorced and all. He'd stayed in Pittsburgh and visited once or twice a year. Neither Molly nor I were allowed to visit him.

He had been almost overwhelmingly supportive and happy around me the first couple of years and it unnerved me but I played along. I smiled a lot and nodded but didn't really confide in him. Something in my gut told me to keep to myself.

Then I decided to ask him what he knew of my teenage "dating life" and he told me that I'd been a total "lady-killer". I reminded him I'd been bashed for being gay and he shook his head harshly and insisted that Chris Hobbs had made the wrong assumption. I wasn't gay, he said with a smile plastered on his face.

The bashing hadn't knocked me straight. And it sickened me that my father had hoped my sexuality was something else I'd lost. When I argued that point with him he cursed under his breath and told me "You want to get bashed again? Fine. I'm not going to be around this time when it happens."

We hadn't talked since which was fine by me. My father was a homophobe. And I didn't need any of those in my life.

I carefully maneuvered my way out of Brooklyn and onto the I-78 West on ramp. My mind flips back to Aiden. My mother loved him. She had since the first night she met him – at my first art show. She'd seen me talking to him and later was all full of questions. Who was he? How did I meet him? Did I like him? How old was he?

And then came the approvals. He's smart. He's cute. He's the perfect age for me. That was a weird one – but she was a mom and they tended to get weird. And I was just happy she didn't care that he was a "he". I was blessed to have a mother who was supportive of my sexuality.

And a boyfriend who'd been so patient – with everything. But eventually he was bound to reach his limit.... He already had once. When I moved into the loft he asked me if he could move in too. We'd been dating seriously for a long time but I still wasn't ready to live with him – or anyone.

I was still having nightmares – more frequently than I let on to Aiden or my mom or my therapist. And the loft.... It was special to me. It meant not only had I survived – despite the memory loss and then headaches and the hand tremors - but I had survived and succeeded. It was my trophy. My prize and it made me feel... almost human again.

And sometimes when I was alone in the loft – late at night painting or even just relaxing this feeling washed over me. A feeling that... I had been there before. And if Aiden was there all the time, I might not get that feeling.

But when faced with losing him – when he told me he was out, he needed more than I was giving - I couldn't do it. I couldn't let him walk away so I let him move in. And now he knew about the frequency of the nightmares. And he had every right to look worried and somber when I announced I would go help this Melanie Marcus lawyer put my attacker in jail.

Because neither of us knew what mental wounds this visit to Pittsburgh would open up. What it would be like to face the man who took a year of my life... And who else would I meet that I wouldn't remember?

But what both terrified me and excited me more than anything - was the thought that there might be something I *will* remember.

### Chapter 3

*"Over you... I'm never over you..." (Back to You - J. Mayer)*

"Where the FUCK have you been?"

I don't answer the raging muncher as I lean lazily on the doorframe, my hangover still dominating my body.

"You were supposed to be here two hours ago!" Mel hisses.

"Something kept coming up," I snark and push past her into the hall of their kitschy little Victorian.

She hooks her fingers around my elbow and keeps me from going farther into the room. I stare at her.

"What? Did I interrupt some hot lesbo sex session?"

"We drove Gus to Deb's with JR when you didn't show."

Shame wiggles its way through the numbness of my hangover.

Lindsay, appears in the archway from the living room, looking disappointed. I catch her eye and she takes a deep breath. "He was really looking forward to seeing you, Brian."

"I'm here." I argue. "I was just a little late."

"Well if you want to see him go to Deb's," Mel starts shoving me toward the door. "And chew some gum, you stink of liquor."

I break free of Mel, and make my way to Linz in the living room. I kiss her cheek lightly but the scowl on her face doesn't budge.

"I know you don't want to be a typical parent but if you don't want to be parent at all then let me know so I can stop getting his hopes up," Lindsay says in a firm, quiet voice. "I thought you were finally coming around...."

Mel reaches for my arm again and I jerk away. "What the fuck is so important that you kicked the kids out on a Sunday afternoon anyway?"



“I have to interview a potential witness,” Me explains swiftly. “And it’s a sensitive case.”

“Since when do you bring a sensitive witness home on a Sunday,” I ask and then it hits me – like a MAC truck. “Is this about that fucker?”

Mel nods hesitantly.

“I thought the victim was still in the hospital?” I counter. “In a coma. I thought you didn’t have witnesses?”

I swallow but my mouth is suddenly dry and my heart aches with every beat. I’ve never seen this guy that Chris Hobbs attacked but his injuries are similar to ones I know too well. It guts me when I think about it which is why I’ve been doing everything possible to not think about it.

“No one saw the attack but I’m interviewing other people – character witnesses - for possible testimony at the trial,” Mel explains and there is something still a little off in her voice. “A few of them are... I just thought this would be a less intimidating environment. A lot of people don’t like talking about hate crimes.”

“Forget the trial,” I say swiftly. “I’ll kill him myself.”

“Brian...” Lindsay warns and steps closer to me, putting a hand on my arm as I rise up off the couch. “We’re going to get him this time.”

“We should have gotten him the last time,” I all but hiss. I swallow again and restrain myself. “I’ll testify. I know what a homophobic asshole this guy is. I’ve witnessed his... I should testify.”

“The first thing the prosecution will do is discredit you as a male slut who took advantage of a teenager,” Mel says calmly with eyes full of sympathy. “We know that’s the not at all the truth but the jury won’t know.”

I stare at her with hard eyes. I know it’s not her fault. She’s just telling me the truth. It’s what people will see when they look at me. It’s what I see when I look at me. If I hadn’t taken Justin home that night – if I hadn’t been on some huge self-absorbed ego trip to take this pretty boy’s virginity....

“Brian... I need you to go.” Mel urges.

I blink and nod still trying to quell my rage. Lindsay steps forward and hugs me lightly then kisses my cheek.

“I’m going to Deb’s. I want to see Gus,” I mumble and she nods and finally smiles a bit.

I make it down to my Corvette and slide into the driver’s seat and my mind is going a million miles a minute.

I rarely read the paper – at least not much more than the front page. But I do skim through it every day to take a look at the ads and make sure any ads my agency has bought are looking the way they should. The Post Gazette has a way of accidentally placing ads on the wrong

pages or in the wrong sections and I have to catch that before my clients do. Now that Gardner has announced his retirement the pressure is on for me to be nothing short of perfect – the clients have to have confidence that I'll be able to run Vanguard on my own.

But his name is seared into my soul. So when, buried on page 5 of the local news section, I saw the words Chris Hobbs, my blood ran cold. The headline read: Man in Coma after Possible Attack.

Possible Attack?! FUCK. THEM.

The whole article was etched in my brain now. I could almost recite it verbatim.

A homosexual college student was at a bar in a working class part of the Pitts, known to be frequented by construction workers and mechanics. He approached a 23 year old male named Chris Hobbs and made sexual advances. Hobbs says he simply demanded the 19 year old, named Dean Bartlett, leave him alone. The student did not and when shoving occurred, both Bartlett and Hobbs were kicked out of the bar. Bartlett was found unconscious and bleeding from the head an hour later in the parking lot of the establishment. Hobbs was arrested when officers found blood on his clothing when they went to his home later that night to question him. The blood matches Bartlett's but Hobbs insists Bartlett attacked him and he simply defended himself. Bartlett is in a coma.

I read the article 3 times and then ripped the paper to shreds. I stormed from the diner, Michael on my heels begging to know what was wrong. I headed straight to the police station and barged into Carl's office. He didn't even try to calm me down. He just let me rant and scream. Finally, when I calmed down a little bit, he told me Debbie had told him once of my ties to that fateful prom night and he actually remember the case. He knew that Hobbs got off light and he knew that this was a bashing too. He promised me he'd do everything in his power to make sure Hobbs was charged that way. I begged him to make sure Hobbs didn't get bail because if he did..... they wouldn't need a trial.

Luckily Carl was kind enough to not charge me with uttering a death threat and smart enough to call Melanie to make sure she knew about the case. Mel had started working with the State as a prosecutor two years earlier. She was their go-to lawyer for cases involving hate crimes or violent attacks.

I took the rest of that day off and locked myself in the loft and drank myself senseless. Deb, of course, showed up with some macaroni concoction and would not leave until I let her in. She tried to talk me down. She told me how we'd get him this time and how this Bartlett kid would be okay.

I reminded her that Justin was never okay. That he'd never be okay. That maybe he'd moved on and maybe he was happy now but he wasn't okay. And I wasn't fucking okay. I would never be okay. She, like her boyfriend, let me rant without judgement. I finally pulled it together and calmed down with the help of a thick, freshly rolled joint.

That was 72 hours ago.

I managed to get my ass back to work the next day and then spent the entire weekend melting my brain with booze and chemicals since I couldn't shut it off. Justin was all I could think about.

And just when I'd finally managed to control the pain – subdue it even. It had taken me years – fucking years – to feel the slightest bit better. The first year after Justin left I'd fallen apart. I almost lost my job, I drank and took so many drugs Michael had to take me to the hospital not once but twice because he thought I might be overdosing. He and Deb and the gang staged an intervention, which caused me to disown all of them and refuse to speak to anyone for almost 6 months. I started applying for jobs in Chicago and Boston and even fucking Canada. But I would get drunk on the flight over for the interview and never get a call back.

Finally one night at almost midnight Jennifer called. They'd been gone for 14 months.

"Debbie told me what you're doing to yourself," She said without so much as a hello. "He's in art school and he's happy. And he would be crushed if he knew what had happened to you."

"Tell him," I urged in a Jack Daniels haze. "He won't give a shit. He doesn't know me."

"Brian... don't you think Chris Hobbs has taken enough from all us of already?"

I hung up on her. The next day as I struggled to not vomit at my desk a courier showed up with a package. It had no return address. I opened it to find several photos of Justin. His hair had grown out and he was smiling or laughing in every single one of them. Also in the box was a pencil sketch of a city skyline – New York. There was also a small note from Jennifer.

*You helped him by letting him go. Now help yourself by doing the same.*

I started seeing a shrink the next day. And Jennifer kept the packages coming – one every few months ever since. There was never a return address but she never overtly hid his location either sometimes she included newspaper clippings from the College newspaper profiling his artwork and a review from his first gallery show.

We had an unspoken agreement that she would keep letting me know how he was as long as I stayed away.

And then this. This was like a stick of dynamite had gone off under the feeble cardboard box I'd managed to pack the pain away in.

I take a deep breath to calm myself as I pull the car to a stop in front of Deb's house. I knock on her front door and she opens it grinning brightly. She's wearing a horrible flowered apron and holding a spatula coated in thick chocolate chip cookie dough.

"Come on in! We're making cookies!" She screeches and my hangovered head starts to pound again.

I groan. Gus looks up from his position in the kitchen in front of the table and he beams at the sight of me.

"Daddy!" He runs to me as fast as his 6 year-old legs can carry him.

"Sonny boy!" I scoop him up and burry my face in his neck oblivious to the way his dough covered fingers are touching my shirt.

When I let him go Deb is smiling at me softly. She pats the top of Gus' chestnut head playfully. "Go make sure JR doesn't eat all the dough!"

Gus goes clamoring back into the kitchen and Deb whispers to me. "The girls were worried you'd... forgotten."

I nod. "They have every right to doubt me."

"I didn't doubt you," Deb assures me and she slaps me with her free hand on my backside. "Now get in there and help the kids!"

I do as I am told and 40 minutes later I'm sitting on the couch watching Gus and JR devour warm cookies and cold milk while Deb watches me contently.

"Enough with the staring," I warn her.

She sighs. "It's just with everything that's happened. Well... your still holding it together."

"I've been stoned or drunk almost every waking hours since I found out," I admit even though I know she knows. "And I intend to drink myself and screw myself into oblivion again tonight."

"Okay fine," Deb says quietly. "But you remembered your son and your still talking to us, your family, so we're still better off than we were last time."

I say nothing because I have nothing to say. I stare blankly blinking every now and then and studying my son as he gets more and more covered in melted chocolate and he grins from ear-to-ear. He's the only reason I'm keeping it together. I won't hurt him like I did last time. I won't fall apart and retreat from life because that means shunning him and I can't do that – not again.

"I know you don't believe it Brian, but Carl and Mel are working their asses off to make sure they get him this time," Deb assures me as she leans over and wipes a chocolate blob from her grand daughter's chin.

"I know they'll try," I agree. "But we tried the first time. Didn't work."

"That's the point," Deb replies. "Hobbs has a history. He's a known homophobe. We can make a jury see that!"

"Mel won't let me testify," I inform Deb. "But I'm the only one who saw him attack Justin. I'm the one who saw the history between them. I'm the one who can tell them about how he terrorized Justin."

Deb doesn't say anything.

"I mean if I don't testify who else can?"

"Daphne," Deb says quietly. "I think Mel is going to ask Daphne. She was in school with Justin. She knows what Hobbs did to him."

Daphne. Fuck, that was a name I hadn't heard in years. The little curly-haired sidekick who used to look at me like I hung the moon. The last time I saw her she kicked me in the nuts.

"Oh so they wanted me out of the house so I didn't run into Daphne," I say quietly. "I guess I should thank them for protecting my testicles."

Deb smiles slightly but it's strained and that makes me... nervous.

I get up and hug and kiss Gus.

Gus – the son Justin named. I swallow hard.

Deb gives me a big hug and kiss as I reach for her front door. I smile lightly. "I think I'm going to go over and see Daphne anyway."

"Right now? At Mel's?!"

"Look I know she hates me for encouraging Jennifer when she wanted to move away," I admit. "But right now that's not important. Putting Chris Hobbs away is."

"Brian!" Deb reaches for my arm as I step onto the stoop. "Don't."

"Deb? What the fuck?!" Her brashly painted fingernails are digging into my flesh.

"It's not Daphne."

"What?"

"I mean they do want Daphne to testify but that's not who Mel is talking to right now," Deb confesses her big eyes wide with panic.

I stare at her. Who else besides myself and Daphne....

Suddenly I can't breathe. I feel my head move from side to side in a slow "no" motion. Deb's eye fill with tears. I don't now why.

It can't be.... Mel wouldn't....

"Justin."

She can do nothing but nod.

## **Chapter 4**

*"I tired to forget you... I tried to stay away..." (Back to You – J. Mayer)*

After what feels like forever – fucking days of waiting while my pathetic heart aches with every shitty beat it takes, but is in reality only probably 45 minutes – the porch light starts to glow. Seconds later the front door opens. I see nothing at first. Then he steps onto the porch.

The air in my lungs evaporates.

His blonde hair is longer, mostly on top. And he looks.... Like he's been working out a little. His square shoulders are covered in only a charcoal gray long sleeve thermal shirt. He's wearing jeans and sneakers. Still with the sneakers.

He moves his hands as he chats with one of the girls – I can't tell which one from my position huddled in my dark car, parked a house over. But both his hands are moving fluidly and nimbly and I'm so grateful because the last time I saw him.... His right hand was pretty much an unresponsive lump by his side.

I see him reach out and shake someone's hand and then he turns and starts down the steps. And then I drink in his facial features like the parched soul that I am....

Skin still strikingly pale. Eyes still blue and intense. Nose still ridiculously perfectly upturned.

He heads right down the walk glancing both ways down the street and I feel my blood go cold when his eyes glance my way. But he can't see me in the darkness. The realization makes me relieved and disappointed in the same moment.

He crosses the street and heads to the dark, compact Mercedes on the opposite side of the street. I memorize every detail of his walk, his stance, his body... it's all inherently exactly like I remembered.

I wipe the dampness from my cheeks and wonder when I started crying.

He slips into the driver's seat and when the car roars to life seconds later as he pulls away from the curb. His headlights illuminate the inside of my car briefly – ever so briefly.

But not briefly enough.

His car comes to a complete stop in the middle of the road, a foot from where he'd been parked – maybe two feet from my car.

He saw me.

He saw me when his headlights landed on my car.

I start the engine instantly and rip the Vette away from the curb, the tires screeching in defiance of the sudden acceleration.

I blow through the stop sign at the end of the block and glance in my rearview to see his blond head poking out the window and craning backward.

When I get home I find three messages from Jen on my answering machine warning me Justin is in the Pitts and please if I loved him at all I would stay away.

I don't call her back. I just flip the machine the bird and open up a new bottle of Beam.

I just want to forget my life.

## Chapter 5

*“Back to you... I walk with your shadow...” (Back to You – J. Mayer)*

I check into the hotel still in a daze. I drop my bag on the bed and collapse next to it trying to will my heart to slow down and my brain to stop spinning.

I’m starting to get a dull ache in my temples. I haven’t had that kind of headache since... well not for years now.

Melanie Marcus and her wife Lindsay Peterson were both very lovely people. They seemed warm and genuine and they looked at me with..... love. From the moment Melanie answered the door and invited me in she seemed to honestly care about me.

I don’t remember ever laying eyes on either of them before but I do feel like they are people I would gravitate toward. Then and now.

Melanie and I sat at their dinning room table for almost 2 hours. Chris Hobbs’ latest victim was still in intensive care. He may not make it. The story made me shudder because I do remember the long fight I had coming out of the coma. I remember the pain in my head and the endless physio therapy for my hand – and the panic and emotional pain of not being able to remember.

I wonder for the quickest second if this kid would be better off dead? I wonder sometimes still, if I would have been.

I told Melanie and Lindsay what had gone on in my life since I moved away. I told them about school and then dropping out of school after my first gallery show was a success. And spending last summer in Paris. And living in Brooklyn. And I told them about Aiden.

They seemed very interested in him – almost a bit too interested. I wondered why... like did this relationship seem like one the old Justin they knew would never be in? I mean, was I a big slut or something when they knew me? Because if I was that would explain my mother’s disdain over discussing my sexual past and my inherent uncomfortable ness with expressing my emotions. Maybe being emotionally intimate wasn’t my nature?

Melanie understood I still didn’t remember the attack – or that entire year – but she felt that if I could even talk to that fact, it would sway a jury. It made me a little uncomfortable, but I agreed to do it. I mean... standing on the stand and talking about it was basically like telling a crowd of strangers “look at me! I’m a victim! I lost a chunk of my mind thanks to this guy!” I wished I could talk of the actual attack instead of having to be still a victim....

My old high school best friend Daphne was going to talk about the bullying I endured from Chris that entire year. And I remembered there had been witnesses to my attack. My mother had always assured me of that. When I asked Melanie if those witnesses were going to testify she looked... pained.

“There was one person who saw the attack,” Melanie told me quietly as we sipped Jasmine tea. “I’m still hoping we don’t need to call on him.”

Lindsay and Melanie exchanged glances and I furrowed my brow. “Why?”

“He’s still... pretty traumatized by the whole thing,” Lindsay all but whispers.

“He’d probably be a bit of an emotional witness,” Melanie admits. “It might backfire.”

I nod and chew on my lower lip in order to avoid asking them his name. I don’t know if legally I have a right to that information. Right after the attack I poured over my yearbook trying to figure out which classmates witnessed what had happened to me. My mother never wanted to talk about it. And really, what difference would it make anyway? It would just be a name. Two words that had no meaning.

Now, in the hotel room lit only by a faint glow from the bathroom light I flipped on when I entered, my mind won’t calm down. And it’s not because of meeting people I don’t remember knowing. It’s not because of talking for hours about the attack or about Hobbs’ new violent crime. It’s because of the face my headlights flickered across.

That face in the dark car on the side of the road.

Chestnut hair. Hazel Eyes. Roman nose. Full lips. All revealed for a second in a flash of light and then gone.

But in that second..... a wave washed over me.

I know him.

I don’t know how I met him, or where he lives or what his name is or anything – but there was a spark of recognition so fierce and so all-encompassing that it made me light-headed.

Who the fuck was he?

Why was he sitting there watching me? Was he watching me?

Fuck.

My cell phone starts to play Bach and I pull it from my pocket and stifle a groan. I knew this call would come.

“Hi mom.”

“Justin! Where are you? What the hell have you done?!”

“Relax.” I demand shortly. “I’m in Pittsburgh. I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

“When Aiden told me.... Goddamnit Justin! You need to come back. Now!”

“No mom, I don’t,” I argue as calmly as I can because screaming back at her won’t help anything, even if it would feel fantastic. “I need to help the lawyers here put Chris Hobbs away. Finally. For good.”

“It’s too.... You’re not ready.” I hear the anguish in her voice and it’s hard to be angry at her.



“Mom, I *am* ready,” I insist softly. “I’ve been ready to come back for a few years, I think. I just never did because I knew you weren’t ready. But mom... I have to try and do this. He can’t go free again.”

I hear her snuffle and take a jagged breath. “I’m scared. What if this is too much for you? What if emotionally it... it’s too much.”

“It won’t be,” I assure her.

She pauses again and then adds. “Do you... remember anything?”

“Not a thing,” I say dishonestly as that face – that gorgeous god-like face flashes through my head. “But the couple I met – Lindsay and Melanie – seem very kind and nice. I see why I hung out with them.”

“I liked them,” my mother admits softly. “Are they the only people you’ve... reconnected with?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to call Daphne tomorrow.”

Silence.

“Mom....?”

“Okay. Yeah,” she says tightly. I still after all these years have no idea why my mother and Daphne don’t get along. I remember my mother loving Daphne – and vice versa – in my junior year.

“I should go. I have a headache and I’m exhausted,” I tell her as I sit up and kick my shoes and socks off.

“A headache? Justin...”

“It’s from the long drive Mom,” I lie. “Look, I’ll be fine. I promise.”

“I love you. So much,” she whispers in what sounds like desperation. “And Aiden loves you. I wish you’d just come home.”

“Mom... I *am* home,” I remind her quietly. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

I hang up and pull off the remainder of my clothing until I’m in nothing but my underwear. I walk into the bathroom take a piss and splash some water on my face.

Tomorrow, I’ll call Daph meet up with her and grill her on my past the way I always wanted to but my mother never let me. Then I’ll head to... what was that street Melanie mentioned? Liberty Avenue. It’s where she said I met her and Lindsay. It’s in the heart of the gay community so maybe – just maybe – I’ll remember something.

Or maybe... I’ll see him. That face... the one I know... somehow.

I pull my hand up and stare at the ink on my inner wrist.

Thank God I had the good sense to write his license plate down.

## Chapter 6

*“Something about you... It’s just the way you move.” (Back to You – J Mayer)*

I’m sitting at the counter waiting for the black coffee I’m sipping to kick in and push the hangover haze from my brain when she storms in. Her caramel eyes lock on mine and she heads straight for me – her long curly hair bouncing wildly with each step.

I jump off the stool and grab my briefcase, positioning it in front of my nuts so she can’t take a shot at them like last time we met.

“He’s back.” She blurts out.

“I know.” I say just as quickly.

She pauses and cocks her head. Her hands climb upward to rest on her hips. “Okay. So now what?”

“Nothing.”

“Seriously?” she hisses her voice climbing with every word she goes on to utter. “He’s back. He came back all on his own. He wants to be back. To remember. And... nothing? You’re going to do *nothing*?!”

“Jesus fuck! Lower your voice!” I sigh. Her yelling is killing me. “He came back to help Melanie. It’s not going to make him remember. He’s going to testify and head right back to the life he made. And that’ll be that.”

She takes a step towards me and I hold the briefcase tighter.

“That’ll be that? What if he remembers?” she asks.

“He won’t.”

“He might.”

“Look I know what you want to hear. I know if you don’t hear it my testicles are in grave danger,” I admit and take a step back. “But I’m not going to find him and fill his head with the memories I have and beg him to remember them too. I... I just won’t. I still say Jen was right in taking him away. In giving him a new beginning.”

Daphne’s brown eyes almost flicker with rage. “You’re a fucking coward.”

She turns, blinks back the anger and smiles at Deb, who is watching the whole thing from behind the counter. Daphne throws herself down on the stool beside me, picking up my half finished coffee and taking a sip before adding creamer to it.

“Deb can I get a menu?” she asks casually. “I’m meeting an old friend for brunch.”

Deb hands her the menu, her eyes as wide as saucers. “You mean... Sunshine?”

Daphne nods tersely.

“Fuck,” I start toward the door.

“He should be here any second,” Daphne snarks.

I’m a foot from the door when it’s pulled open and the bells attached to it jangle and I freeze. It feels like all the blood in my body has dropped into my Prada loafers and....

It’s Emmett.

He barely acknowledges me. He’s ghost white. “I think I saw.... I think I saw.... Justin. Parking a Mercedes. Next to Brian’s Vette.”

“Deb...” I beg and turn to her. My eyes are wild, I know. I’m looking at her the way a caged animal looks at its captor.

She hesitates but then opens the swinging gate and I charge behind the counter looking back only long enough to whisper “You’re a bitch” to Daphne. In the kitchen I wait a minute, take a deep breath, hold it, push the alley door open half an inch and peek out.

Sure enough there is his Mercedes parked next to my Vette. But he isn’t next to it – or in it.

I push the door all the way open and run to the car and slam it into gear and drive away without looking back.

I can’t do it.

I can’t fucking face him.

Daphne thinks I’m a coward – and I am. But for very different reasons than she thinks.

She thinks I’m a coward because I won’t help Justin remember. I’m too scared to try and have it not work. And in a way, that is true. I don’t want to fill his head with everything – everything that was his senior year... our year together and have him stare at me blankly.

But worse still - what makes me a bigger coward than even Daphne realizes - I don’t want to fill his head with those moments and have something click. And have him remember – me. Us.

Because... what if when he remembers..... there’s still nothing there?

What if he remembers and he still goes back to New York.

What if nothing changes.

That would be the end of it for me. It would kill whatever part of my soul is still clinging to life... clinging to the far off, impossible hope that one day he'll remember. One day he'll want me back.

So yeah... I'm definitely a coward. The King of Cowards.

That kid... that Aiden guy. He was Justin's lover now. And maybe that was the way it should be.

In the photo that Jennifer sent of everyone sitting at the table at Christmas dinner last year. That's the first time I saw him. He was positioned next to Justin and smiling brightly. Justin was leaning towards him ever so slightly and he too was smiling, although slightly subdued. Jennifer had written on the back of the picture; *Molly, me, Justin and Aiden at Christmas Eve dinner at Justin's newly purchased apartment.*

That guy... he was probably whole and sane and kind and loving. He was probably everything any guy who craved a relationship would want. And Justin – the Justin I knew – had craved a relationship. And I hadn't been able to give it to him.

I mean maybe I gave it to him that night... at prom... and maybe I even enjoyed it.... maybe I had started to change... but look what it got us?

As I get out of the car, in front of the office, I find my hands shaking every so slightly. I lean against the car's frame and will myself to take some deep, soothing breaths.

I wish I could find the fucking balls to face him. To end it once and for all....

## **Chapter 7**

*"But forgive me, love... I can't turn and walk away." (Back to You by J. Mayer)*

The bells on the glass door jingle abruptly as I pull open the door. The minute I step inside I scan the room for that face.... The face I know.

I don't see him and I feel automatic disappointment.

Daphne is watching me expectantly from the counter and I walk over slowly, smiling lightly, my eyes still scanning.... Searching...

I notice a tall, lithe guy with blue eyes in a cute, although totally queened out sparkly baby blue T shirt staring at me. He looks like he might burst into tears and his hand is raised to cover his opened mouth.

Daphne jumps off the stool and gives me a bear hug. I hug her back with equal force. I missed her. We email and talk on the phone, and she's come to visit me a few times since I left but I haven't seen her in nearly a year.

"Long time no see!" She says. "And I never thought I'd see you here."

"I know," I reply and pull back from the hug. "I never thought I'd be here."

I turn, the dude is still staring at me.

I sit down next to her and lean a little closer. “Do I know that guy over there?”

Her brown eyes glide past me to the guy standing at the end of the counter at the end near the restrooms. She smiles at him and waves. I turn to see him wave back and sniff dramatically like he’s about to burst into tears.

“That is Emmett,” Daphne tells me quietly. “You knew him. You hung out with him a lot.”

I turn, swiveling my stool till I am facing him. “Hi Emmett.”

His eyes grow wide and his mouth hangs open. I stand up and walk towards him with my hand extended. “Daphne tells me we were friends?”

I can see the disappointment in his eyes as he realizes I didn’t remember him on my own. He shakes my hand. “Yes,” he explains. “I knew you for the last couple of months before the...”

“Before the attack,” I add for him to show him it’s okay to mention it.

“You look....” He smiles a little. “You look fabulous Justin.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

I pause and then can’t help but add. “How did we meet? I mean obviously you weren’t in my class, right?”

This Emmett guy is clearly about 10 years older than me. He looks adorable and fabulous but not in his early 20s.

“I... you were... I’m friends with...”

“You worked here,” the voice comes from behind me. It’s female but it’s not Daphne.

I turn and see a friendly looking older woman behind the counter. She’s got flaming red hair and multicolored plastic bracelets adorn her arms and her bright yellow T shirt with a squirrel on it that says It’s all Fun & Games Till Someone Loses a Nut.

“He knows you from here,” She tells me. “And you had mutual friends.”

“I worked here?” I say and approach the counter again.

“Best damn bus boy and waiter this place has ever seen,” she announces. “And I would know. I’ve been here for fucking ever.”

She extends her hand. “Debbie Novotny.”

“Debbie?” I smile suddenly. “My mom talks about her friend Debbie every now and then. Do you have a gay son?”

“Sure do,” she replies with a nod. “Michael.”

“Yeah... that must be you.” I suddenly realize this is who my mom sometimes talks about. The woman who helped her to accept my sexuality and to join PFLAG and everything. I smile at her in gratitude and reach to shake her hand.

“Thank you,” I tell her softly. “For.... Well for probably more than I realize.”

She looks shocked but smiles and tries not to tear up. “Anything for you Sunshine.”

Sunshine?

Sunshine.

“That feels... familiar,” I tell Daphne as Deb heads off to take a table’s order. “Sunshine.”

Daphne’s whole face lights up like the Christmas tree in Times Square. “It was your nickname senior year. Debbie gave you it! You remember?”

I shake my head, sad I am disappointing her. “No. It just feels... familiar. Right. It feels right.”

Daphne nods. “Does the diner feel right?”

I nod a little. It honestly does feel.... Comfortable. “What would feel right is a stack of pancakes with strawberry syrup and a side of bacon.”

Daphne lets out a squeaking sound in her joy. “That was your favorite meal here! I had no idea how you ate it 4 days a week and didn’t end up 500 pounds, but you did!”

“Well at least my taste buds remember,” I quip and she smiles and punches my arm.

I glance over and that guy Emmett is still standing there staring at me. I smile. “Why don’t you sit down and join us?”

“Me? Really?” He looks like I just announced his name for a Tony Award or something.

I nod. “Yeah. I mean we were all friends right? Maybe you can answer some of my questions.”

Emmett literally *skips* over and I can’t help but grin. He’s freaking charming. He smiles at me and touches my arm lightly. “Ask anything!”

“Who owns the classic Corvette parked outside?”

“Anything else. Ask anything else!” He replies without blinking.

My heart falls. “You don’t know?”

“I....” He looks suddenly uncomfortable. “I know Deb wasn’t lying. You were the best damn bus boy this place ever saw. I know you looked smokin’ hot in red. Still do!”

I glance down at the short-sleeved red T shirt I have on over a long sleeve black one. Despite the compliment, I furrow my brow and Daphne gives Emmett a hard stare.

“The Corvette belongs to Brian.”

I turn to Debbie as she leans in on the opposite side of the counter.

“Brian.” I repeat.

“Brian Kinney,” Daphne adds and I turn to her.

All three of them stare at me expectantly – with fear and excitement. Like that name should make my head explode or something.

“Brian Kinney,” I say it and a tingle runs the course of my spin. I shiver. “I don’t... remember him.”

Deb’s eyes are suddenly sad. So are Daphne’s. Emmett’s are filled with tears.

“How did I know him?” I question. “Because I know I know him.”

“You do... I mean you did,” Daphne replies, trying to keep her voice upbeat. “He was all you talked about the entire year.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s Brian Kinney,” Deb adds with a snarky smile as the bell behind her rings and she goes to deliver an order. “He’s all most gay boys talk about. G0ood or bad.”

“I had a crush?” I offer.

“You had an obsession,” Emmett clarifies.

I can’t help but look horrified. He laughs and pats my arm. “It’s okay honey. It was reciprocal whether Brian ever admits it or not. And he won’t.”

“Not even now?” Daphne asks, surprised.

“Especially not now!” Emmett leans past me toward Daphne. “Honey the name Justin Taylor is completely off limits. Ted brought it up once when we were at Babylon about 6 months ago and Brian took a swing at him. Can’t stand the pain of it all. Even now.”

“Oh my God,” Daphne looks stunned. “Ted? Brian hit sweet little sweet Ted?!”

Emmett nods his head – he even does that flamboyantly. “Well, he took the swing. Luckily he was too high and too drunk and he missed. Unlike you with your ball-kicking, Brian isn’t as good a shot.”

“Where is he?” I ask interrupting their gossiping yenta-fest.

“Who?” They ask in unison.

“Brian Kinney,” I feel the tingle again. “His car is outside so where is he? Does he work in the kitchen or something?”

They both laugh out loud like I’m suddenly a stand up comic.

“What’s got you two peeing your pants and poor Sunshine lookin’ lost?” Deb wants to know as she returns. Neither of them can catch their breath long enough to answer.

“I asked if Brian Kinney was working here.”

Deb laughs too, but stays in control. “Brian Kinney is a high powered advertising executive about to take over the reigns on one of the biggest ad agencies in Pittsburgh.”

“So is he here? Or does he just park here?”

Deb’s eyes soften and her smile turns sympathetic. “He left. Out the back door.”

I think about that for a second. “Because of... me?”

“Because he’s a fucking spineless coward,” Daphne virtually hisses and I stare at her.

“You two aren’t friends I take it?” I smile at her.

“He’s a coward,” she repeats.

Deb drops a double order of waffles, strawberry syrup, whip cream and a side of bacon in front of me. I smile gratefully and pick up a fork.

“So who is going to tell me where he works so I can find him?”

I swallow down the first bite and it tastes like perfection. I’ve had this meal a billion times at a billion different restaurants but this time.... It tastes better than any other time – that I remember.

“Cinnamon,” I say in a whisper.

“What was that Sunshine?” Deb asks.

“Cinnamon,” I say slightly louder. “The batter has cinnamon in it. That’s why they taste... so good.”

Deb nods. “Yep and-“

“Real vanilla extract,” I mumble.

“You can taste it?”

“No... I just... I know.”

“You remember!” Daphne gasps.



"I... sort of... I just know," I reply and catch her eye. "The same way I know that I know Brian Kinney."

"But..."

"I saw him. The other night," I explain. "Outside Melanie Marcus and Lindsay Peterson's house."

They all stare at me with big eyes and open silent mouths.

"I knew the minute I saw him that I knew him. I just don't remember how..." I explain.

"I knew Brian would trigger something," Daphne tells me excitedly as she takes a bit of the egg white omelet Deb has put in front of her. Obviously she knows Daph's order as well as she knows mine. Even after all these years.

"Don't get your hopes up, Daph," I warn her. "Nothing may come of this, but I just feel like... I should see this guy again."

"If anyone will trigger anything for you it will be Brian Kinney," Deb admits softly. "But your mom may be right Justin. Maybe you'll be worse off if you remember."

"Maybe," I admit because I know she's right. Remembering someone taking a bat to your head and all the drama that must have led up to that point, probably will be horrific for me. "But it's my decision and I would rather remember something horrible and deal with it then live with a hole in my life."

Daphne nods emphatically. "Let's finish breakfast and I'll drive you to Vanguard."

45 minutes later I'm standing on the marble floor on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor of a huge high-rise in midtown Pittsburgh. A cute young receptionist is talking into her headset telling Brian Kinney's assistant that I'm here to see him.

I regret eating all those pancakes. My stomach is flipping slopping violently right now.

The receptionist clicks a button and looks up at me with a business-like smile. "Cynthia says Mr. Kinney is in a meeting right now. He has meetings all day. But you're welcome to make an appointment for sometime next week."

"Thank you," I say trying not to get angry. It's not her fault this Kinney guy is an asshat. "That won't be necessary."

I stalk past her desk as fast as I can without running. She stands and calls out a "Mr. Taylor!" but does nothing else. I glance at the names on the assistants desks outside offices and pray I chose the right direction.

Finally, near the end of the hall, I see a nameplate that says Cynthia and a sandy-haired woman staring at me in surprise. Next to her is a neatly groomed, dark haired man in a well-tailored suit holding a spreadsheet.

“Justin...” The dark haired guy says my name trepidatiously, but like he knows me.

“Is he really in a meeting?”

“He’s busy.” Cynthia says and grabs my arm as I start past her desk towards the frosted glass door with his name etched on it.

I gently but firmly yank my arm free and reach for the door handle. My breath catches in my throat as I swing the door open.

He’s sitting behind his desk with a series of storyboards in his hands.

As our eyes meet, the boards fall from his hands and he rises to his feet slowly.

My heart races and starts pounding so hard against my rib cage I think it might crack.

“Justin...” he whispers hoarsely.

I grab the doorframe for support because I’m suddenly light-headed.

“Brian...” I whisper back.

## **Chapter 8**

***“Back to me... I know that it comes... Back to me...” (Back to You by J. Mayer)***

I feel like I might throw up and pass out at the same time.

And Justin looks like I feel.

I come around my desk on wobbly legs, my pulse is pounding in my ears and my vision is blurred around the edges, behind him I see a confused Cynthia and a concerned Ted standing outside the door.

I motion at Justin to come in. “Close the door.”

He does as he is told.

We’re alone now.

Just me and him.

Justin.

Oh god.... Justin.

I’ve both dreamed of and feared this.

But now that it’s here I feel oddly..... relieved.

He is staring at me. His beautiful clear blue eyes fixated on me. On my face.... And he – surprisingly – isn't wearing a blank expression.

“Brian.” He says my name more firmly than the first time.

“Justin.”

He smiles.

“I know you.”

Three simple words and my heart suddenly starts to beat again. I swear it hasn't pumped once since the attack and now... now I feel it, warm and strong in my chest. Three simple words from his beautiful, perfect lips and my heart is alive again.

All I can manage is a slight nod.

“I was obsessed with you”

My heart falls silent again. The now familiar coldness wraps itself around it again. If Justin truly remembered me... us... he wouldn't say those words. He would never call it an obsession because we both know it wasn't. It was love.

I clear my throat. “Who told you that melodramatic crap?”

There's a dark flicker across his face and then a small grin. Not the usual Sunshine Smile but enough to make my heart aches.

“Everyone,” he replies.

“Look, I'm busy,” I say and try not to sound all too harsh. “I appreciate you stopping by. It was good to see you again but-“

“I know you,” he repeats. “I saw you outside that lawyer's house and I knew even then, in the dark, that I know you.”

I swallow and remain stone-faced.

“So?”

“So I've never felt something so strongly in my life,” he explains to me. “At least not that I remember.”

“That's great and everything but it still doesn't change the fact that I have to work,” I tell him and step towards the door making sure to keep distance between us when I do. I can't risk getting too close to him. I'm fucking scared shitless that he might try to touch me.

I have no idea what will happen if I feel his skin on mine.

“Brian...” he cocks his head, his blonde hair rolling softly into his eyes. “What are you afraid of?”

Fuck him.

“Getting fired because some ex twink is harassing me in the office,” I snap and he looks hurt. I regret it instantly and it makes me even angrier. “Look, I’m glad you sort of remember. Or feel something or whatever. That’s great. But seriously, I can’t help you.”

“You can,” he insists and reaches for my arm to stop me from opening the office door and ushering him out. I literally jump to avoid his grasp.

He freezes. I take a long, jagged breath.

“Listen... Brian. I’m walking around with a huge hole in my head. An empty space. I want my memories back. I know... somehow I know you can help me.”

“Not now,” I say quietly. “Not here.”

“Name the time and place.”

That’s my Justin, always willing to follow me anywhere.

“Woody’s,” I say and he looks confused. “It’s a bar on Liberty. Tonight at 7. Got it?”

“See you then,” he says happily, like he’s won some kind of victory.

I watch him leave and close my door. I lean my weight against it and press my eyelids shut, willing the ache in my chest to fuck off already.

I need a drink.

I need lots of drinks.

There’s a knock. Of course there is a fucking knock.

“Theodore, go back to accounting and crunch some numbers or I will crunch your head.”

“Brian.... You really should talk about..”

“Theodore, kindly – fuck off.”

Silence.

He left. Thankfully.

I slide down the door until I’m sitting on the floor and put my elbows on my bent knees and slide my hands through my hair.

My fingers are trembling and my heart is still hammering. I wanted to touched him so badly. I wanted to run my hands over his skin and press my lips to his neck and slide my tongue into his mouth and tangle my fingers in his hair and...

I wanted to hold him. Hold him and never let go.

Fuck Jennifer. Fuck my promises. Fuck it all.

He knows me.

He knows he knows me.

It could end up being nothing. It might change absolutely fucking nothing.

But maybe.....

My breath catches in my throat.

Maybe it means something...Maybe this is the beginning of Justin remembering.

Maybe.

At least I still had hope. But now I need a scotch to go with it.

## **Chapter 9**

*“Something about you... It’s just the way you move...” (Back to You by J. Mayer)*

I’m so nervous about this meeting that I stop at a store near my hotel and grab a pack of smokes. I haven’t had a cigarette since the year after the accident, but I’m desperate to find something that will calm my nerves.

After that awkward and intense reunion with Brian Kinney, I went back to the hotel and called my mother. The minute I mentioned his name she started to cry. And it wasn’t her typical nervous or sad crying... it was full-on sobs of fear. When I could finally calm her down enough to be able to understand her she explained to me that she never ever wanted me to see Brian Kinney again.

“Why?” I’d asked her as I stared out my hotel room window at the bustling traffic below. “I mean he was... well shocked to see me, I guess. And maybe a little....abrupt. But he was..... I got a really great feeling about him.”

“Of course you do,” she snapped at me. “Brian Kinney can do no wrong in your head.”

“How involved was I with this guy?” I want to know, trying hard to ignore her angry tone.

“What do you think?” She asks instead of answering.

I pause and take a deep breath. “I have no idea, mom.”

“Then maybe he didn’t mean that much to you after all,” she says softly.

“Why are you so against me trying to remember?”

“Justin... I worked very hard to make sure you had a chance to have a good life... despite it all.” She tells me quietly but firmly. “That’s all I ever wanted. For you to be able to get past this. To move on to something bigger and better.”

“I love my life in New York Mom,” I repeat honestly. “But how can it be bigger or better when I don’t even know what it’s supposed to be an improvement on?”

She remained silent for a long time after that. I heard nothing but her breathing for about a minute and then as I was going to open my mouth to say something else she started to speak.

“You dated Brian Kinney for most of your senior year. You thought you were in love with him. I thought he was too old for you and that he was using you. But you wouldn’t walk away from him no matter what he said or did,” she pauses and takes an audible breath as my head races to absorb this outburst of information.

“In the end, I think he really did care about you. Maybe not as much as you cared about him, but as much as he was capable of caring about anyone,” That comment makes me furrow my brow in confusion. For a minute there she could have been describing Aiden and me. I care about Aiden as much as I can, but not as much as he cares about me.

“What made you change your mind... on his feelings towards me?” I prompt.

“Because when it became clear that you were going to live through this but you weren’t going to remember, he stood by my decision to get you out of there. To give you a chance at finding happiness and not living in the constant shadow of what once was and would never be again.”

Now on the street outside of Woody’s I lean against a light post and take a long drag on my smoke as her words tumble around inside my head. It’s a lot to absorb after so many years of silence.

I flip the cigarette into a puddle and glance up. Brian Kinney is getting out of his Vette across the street. He glances up at me and freezes.

Automatically I start to raise my hand to waive and then I stop. My body physically will not do it and my legs will not walk toward him. I’m stuck in this spot, in this position.

I know.... Inherently....somehow... I need to stay exactly where I am.

As he starts towards me, I blink rapidly. When he was standing beside the corvette he was wearing a charcoal gray long sleeve shirt but now as he walks slowly towards me he’s wearing a T black shirt. How can that be?! I keep blinking and with each refocus he switches from the charcoal to the black and back again.

Something isn’t right in my brain..... But it doesn’t hurt. I stay clam because it doesn’t hurt. No headache. No pain. It’s okay. I’ll be..... fuck he looks so beautiful.

He’s a god. The most beautiful thing I have ever seen. This isn’t some kind of new revelation this feels like... déjà vu.

He’s standing in front of me now and I can see nothing but his perfect face. My vision around him swims.

“Where you headed?” he says in a low, deep tone so different from the voice he had in the office earlier today.

I don’t even think about an answer my lips just start to form familiar words. “No place special.”

His eyes widen ever so slightly at that and I know it’s because he’s heard this before. Because I know I’ve said it before.

“I…” he swallows. “I can change that.”

We stare at each other frozen like this – somewhere in the middle of the past and the present – for minutes.

“You… I’ve met you here. Like this. Before.” The inside of my mouth feels like it’s made of cardboard. My arms and legs feel like they are made of lead.

“Exactly like this,” he says in a forced, hoarse whisper. “Only down the block. In front of Babylon.”

For some reason I am compelled to reach out and touch him. My hand barely brushes his when he jerks backward stepping off the curb and says. “I need a fucking drink.”

I struggle to keep up with him as he storms across the street, almost getting hit by a passing car, and walks right into Woody’s.

He doesn’t stop until he’s directly in front of the bartender.

I follow but my pace slows as I inhale and the familiar scent of wood, pool chalk and stale beer overpowers my senses. I see a flash of me standing by the pool table, my face inches from Brian’s and then my head starts to pound.

I rub my temples.

“You okay?” he asks from the bar and I nod.

I lift my head and open my eyes and see Brian finish off a short tumbler of scotch. He lets the glass hit the bar with a hard thud and motions for the bartender to refill it. I slip onto the stool beside him and order my own.

“You don’t like scotch,” Brian tells me quietly.

“I know. But it’s not about what I like right now,” I explain. “It’s about what will get me drunk quickest.”

I take the glass from the bartender and gulp back a mouthful of the brown liquid. It burns a trail down my throat, which, thankfully, takes away from the pain in my head.

Brian finishes his second and orders more for both of us.

“So you remembered?”

I nod and then shake my head.

“Sort of. I knew that you’d said that to me before and that I had said what I said.... But I don’t know why or when or where. I just knew... but I don’t remember,” I sigh and he echoes the sound a second later. I’m frustrating both of us.

I finish the last of my scotch and watch the bartender refill my glass. I glance at Brian sideways. He’s leaning on the bar next to the stool beside me. I let my eyes run from his face down his back to his ass. He’s fucking gorgeous. What the hell did he want with a skinny awkward teenager like me?

“You were wearing a black shirt that night,” I whisper and he turns to me. Our eyes lock.

“I was?”

“I think so.” I tell him. “I mean I think I... for a second outside... I could see you in it.”

“So you *are* remembering,” his voice lifts ever so slightly.

“I guess. I mean... fuck I just wish it was clearer.”

“Give it time Sunshine,” he tells me softly. “You just got here.”

When Debbie said that name it felt right. When Brian says it, it feels right and special.

“Yeah but I’m supposed to go back to New York on Friday,” I explain. “After the trial.”

“Oh,” the lift has left his voice. He downs his drink again.

“I might extend my stay... I mean I want to. Especially if I’m going to have more flashes and more... I just have to-“

“No,” he cuts me off. “You should go back. You have... I’m sure you have people who miss you.”

“I miss me,” I mutter.

I take another swig of scotch and look over to find him staring at me.

“What?”

“You look....” He stops and swallows back the contents of his glass. “You look sad.”

“I’m not,” I reply and run a hand through my hair. “I’m just frustrated.”

He laughs. I don’t know why but he does. I stare at him and he stops instantly.

“Sorry,” he apologizes and his murky green eyes flutter away from mine. “I was just thinking of what I do when I’m frustrated.”



“And what is that?”

“Fuck.”

I laugh. He laughs again too.

The bartender refills our drinks.

It’s almost 9pm when I stumble into the bathroom to pee. The pain in my head has been halted by the alcohol but so has my ability to walk a straight line, speak without slurring my words and not pee every 10 minutes.

But... I also feel better than I have in years. Better than I knew I could feel. I feel.... At peace. And that can’t just be the Johnny Walker Red.

I unzip my fly and pull out my cock as the door opens and Brian saunters in. He stops, his eyes, which have gotten greener and greener with every drink, slip directly downward – to my exposed cock.

I feel a rush of blood to my cheeks and I flutter in my gut.

“Sorry. I’ll wait till you’re done,” he starts to back out of the bathroom.

“Why?” I laugh at his sudden uncomfortable ness. “There’s a free urinal right next to me and I think that I may have seen your dick before, right?”

He smirks. It’s mesmerizing.

“Maybe one or two... hundred times,” he quips and hesitantly makes his way to the urinal beside me.

I can’t help but watch as he pulls his cock lose. He shyly angles his torso away from me.

“Is this how you get so many guys to let you fuck them,” I ask with a suppressed chuckle. “You play shy and hard to get?”

“No,” he says with a smile. “But you’re... different.”

I finished up and try to tuck my cock back in my underwear but it’s not easy because it’s half hard.

Brian Kinney is making me hard.

This is not good. Even though it feels good.

“Why am I different,” I ask, enjoying his uneasiness. I never thought I could make someone this hot uneasy with my very presence.

“Because.” He finishes peeing and starts to put his pretty cock away as he turns to me. “Which of Debbie Novotny’s Lost Boys told you I was a manwhore? Or was it the drag queen herself?”

“None of them,” I smile and shrug. “Nobody walks up to some random guy standing in front of a night club and tells them they can take them some place special if they aren’t a bit of a egotistic slut.”

He laughs out loud at that. So hard he has to lean on the wall by the sinks.

“And to take some teenager you meet on a street corner back to you apartment,” I giggle along with him. “Total slut!”

He stops laughing so abruptly it stuns me. My giggles trickle to a halt as I catch the look of horror on his face.

“You remembered.”

“What?” I suddenly wish I was sober.

“Did someone tell you I took you back to my place that night? On the street corner?” he asks and stands up straighter, towering over me at his full height. “Because I did.”

“No,” I whisper feeling slightly dizzy. “No one told me.”

“You remembered,” he starts to smile.

A small pounding starts in the back of my head. Small but painful.

“Justin... you remembered.”

I nod. The pounding continues. I close my eyes. On the inside of my lids I see him... Brian Kinney. Naked. Damp. His arms outstretched. But he’s standing in the middle of a loft... it looks somewhat similar to my loft.

“You’re naked,” I whisper and the pounding gets worst. I raise my hands to rub my temples. “And wet.”

“I was. Justin...”

“Are you coming or going?” I say as I see his pretty lips form the words behind my eyes like I’m watching a movie. “Or coming then going?”

“Or coming and staying?” I hear him say with me before the throbbing becomes too intense and I buckle with the pain.

He touches me. Wraps his arms around me and pulls me to his chest. The pain triples but then, as suddenly as it started, it’s gone and replaced by a warmth that washes over my body.

I inhale sharply and his scent fills me. He smells like sandalwood and leather and.... Home.

Breathing him in makes me want to cry with relief. I clench my teeth and will the tears to stay away. I don't want to embarrass myself

"Easy Sunshine," he whispers and grips me tighter. "Y'okay?"

I tilted my head upward. My lips brush his Adam's apple and I feel him shiver. "I think so."

He stares down at me, his eyes dark. I wrap my arms around his waist.

He dips his head slightly lower. We're inches apart.

"I saw you... naked and dripping wet.... Was that... did that happen?" I ask as my fingers grip at the fabric covering his back.

"Mmm... same night as the streetlight conversation," he whispers. I feel his fingers tickle the hairs on the back of my neck.

"I could see you but you were... in my apartment in New York," I explain. "Well... or maybe not but.. it was a loft that looked like mine."

"You own a loft?" Brian asks as my lips graze his neck again. I'm doing it on purpose and it's killing both of us, I'm sure. I feel my cock start to ache for release and I can feel his hard against my hip.

"Yeah. In Brooklyn. I live there with..." I swallow and a brief but fierce feeling of guilt hits me.

He steps away from me. I almost moan in protest.

"It's getting late," he says firmly a pained look on his face. "We should call it a night."

He leaves the bathroom and I follow him to the bar where we settle our tab. He throws it all on his gold card without even consulting me.

Once we're outside he turns to me. "Let's get you a cab."

"You need one too," I remind him. "You shouldn't drive."

"I won't." He assures me. His tone is light and detached and I long for the connection in the bathroom to come back.

"We could share one."

"We're going in different directions," he informs me.

He steps to the curb and waves down a cab. He leans in the window and asks the cabby to take me to my hotel. I grab his hand and he bristles.

"Brian..." I say softly trying to coax him into taking down the wall he's thrown up. "I don't want to leave you yet."

“It’s late.”

“So what?”

“Justin...” he sighs. “I want to go home.”

“So let me go with you.”

He catches my eye. “If you come with me.... You will cheat on your boyfriend.”

“How the fuck do you know I have a boyfriend?”

“Because you always wanted one,” he replies in a voice tinged with melancholy. “And you always got what you wanted.”

“Tonight I want you.”

He smiles at that but shakes his head. “You want your memories. And I don’t want you to fuck me only because you think it might get you that.”

He opens the cab’s back door and gently shoves me inside. Before I can open my mouth to protest the door’s been closed and the cabbie has started down the street.

I watch him in my rearview mirror until I can’t see him anymore.

The cell phone in my pocket rings and I see Aiden’s name and my heart drops and I silently thank Brian for stopping me from getting carried away.

## **Chapter 10**

*“I tired to forget you... I tried to stay away... But it’s too late.” (Back to You by J. Mayer)*

As I walk in the door of the darkened loft I throw my briefcase in the general direction of the kitchen. It makes a hard, loud smack as it hits the floor.

I storm straight to the booze sitting on the stainless steel cart by the windows and grab the bottle of Crown Royal, not bothering with a glass, and head into the bedroom.

I pull off my jacket and drop it on the bed. It lands right next to the gray silk Kenneth Cole tie I tried to tie 4 times this morning before I cursed at it, ripped it from my neck and dropped there on the unmade bed.

I undo my charcoal Armani pants and kick them from my body as I take a giant swig from the bottle of Rye.

All I’ve thought about for the last 2 days is Justin. And drinking. Because the only time I’m not thinking about Justin is when I’m drinking.

Actually, that's a lie. I still think about Justin when I'm drinking – it just doesn't hurt as much.

I pull off my socks and take another swig from the bottle before making my way back through the living room. In the kitchen I start to load ice cubes into a tall, crystal drinking glass before pouring the Crown into it.

I haven't seen him in 48 hours. He's been busy with the trial and I've been busy trying to ignore his existence. And everyone else's. Michael, Deb, Lindsay, Ted – even fucking Mel – have tried to call me and see how I'm doing. I guess Justin mentioned, in passing, that we'd gone for drinks.

That just proves that little Sunshine has no memories whatsoever. If he remembered anything about our friends he'd know that saying anything about us – him and I – would start a fucking shitstorm. Nosy fuckers.

The only call I returned was Mel's because I wanted to know about the trial and if she needed me. She said that opening arguments went well. Justin sat quietly in the back of the room. Chris Hobbs had noticed him right away but hadn't approached him or anything. And no, she didn't need me to testify. Yet.

So I hung up on her as soon as she started with the “Brian... how did it go with Justin the other night?”

I throw myself down on the couch and flip on the TV flipping through the channels aimlessly until I find a Mad Men marathon on AMC. I love this fucking show... not that I'd ever admit it to anyone.

I'm halfway through the bottle of Crown when I hear my name. Being yelled. Outside. What. The. Fuck?!

I stand and walk over to the window and there he is. Standing on the sidewalk in the pouring rain. Yelling.

My heart races.

“Brian fucking Kinney!”

I pull open the window and stick my head out, feeling the raindrops hit me right away.

“What the fuck are you doing?!”

“Let me in!”

“Go home!”

“I am home aren't I?” he yells back. “I mean you let me live with you right?”

“Until you fucked up and I was robbed.” I call back.

“Let me in Brian!” he shouts and I can see him shivering in the rain from up here. “Please!”

“Fine! Just shut the fuck up!” I yell and head to the elevator leaving my front door wide open.

When I get downstairs he’s huddled by the door. I push it open and he rushes in, soaking wet from head to toe. He’s shivering uncontrollably.

“Well you may be older but you aren’t wiser,” I tell him angrily. “This is the kind of shit you’d have pulled when you were 17.”

“Whatever,” he dismisses me and heads straight for the elevator stepping in without even looking at me. “Nice outfit. If that’s how adults dress I’ll stay young, thanks.”

I glance down and realize I’m wearing only my black boxer briefs and my unbuttoned Armani dress shirt. Oops.

I join him in the elevator with a small shrug.

“What floor?” he asks and my heart aches a little. I wish he knew.

I don’t answer I just hit the button and pull down the gate and the elevator chugs upward.

Justin stares at me quietly, his eyelashes dripping with raindrops. I step closer and place my hand gently on the side of his face and use my thumb pad to wipe away the drops. He closes his eyes and steps closer to me so now our torsos are touching.

“Why did you come here?” I whisper.

He reaches out and touches my hips, under my shirt just above the waistband to my underwear.

His skin on mine..... it’s..... making my heart hammer. It’s making my blood race. It’s making my dick hard. And there’s no way to hide any of it.

“I needed to see you,” he confesses. “I haven’t seen you in days.”

“So?” I remind him my voice suddenly strained. “I’m not the reason you came here.”

“We both know that’s not true,” he whispers back, his head tipped downward as he watches the bulge in my underwear twitch and expand.

I watch his hair drop rainwater onto the elevator floor between us.

His fingers start to move up my sides and then back down again. I shiver.

“You came back to put Hobbs in jail,” I barely manage to finish the sentence.

“I came back to find out why no matter what I do... or how much I move forward... something in my heart keeps pulling me back,” he explains.

He raises his head now. Our eyes meet as the elevator stops on my floor.

I pull away from him and start back toward my wide-open apartment.

I glance behind me to see him smirking as he steps into the hallway. I raise my eyebrow at him.

“Lindsay Peterson says you kicked me out for leaving the door unlocked. But now you leave it wide open?!”

“It’s my apartment,” I rationalize irrationally. “Twat.”

His smirk grows as he steps inside. And then his beautiful blue eyes grow wide.

“What?”

“It looks....” He smiles a little. “Like mine.”

I lean against the kitchen island for support and turn to face him. “How?”

“Well it’s a loft,” he says quietly. “And I have a couch really similar to that one. And a painting of a naked guy. But mine’s better looking.”

I can’t help but laugh at that.. He smiles. I motion towards the door. “Shut the door.”

He shrugs out of his soaking wet jean jacket and makes his way to the door. He grabs it and pulls it closed. And then I see his shoulders tense and his body go rigid.

He opens it again, Then he closes it again.

“Justin..?” I’m suddenly terrified.

He’s facing the door, his hand still clutching the handle so tightly his knuckles are white. His forehead against the metal.

I say his name again.

He whispers something I can’t decipher. I walk tentatively toward him. He’s still whispering.

“Justin.”

I’m directly behind him now. I can see his body is shaking lightly.

“Justin what is it?” I say louder and touch his shoulder lightly.

He turns abruptly and grabs my shirt pulling me so my whole body is suddenly flush with his. I flinch, but it’s not from the damp cold of his clothing. It’s from the contact. From the sudden feel of his body – the body I’ve longed for year after year – against mine.

“Are you coming or going?” he asks me, only I know he’s not actually asking me. “Or coming then going?”

He fucking remembers!

His hands let go of my open shirt, sliding under the fabric. His fingers graze my ribs before sliding over my abdomen.

“Or coming and staying?” he finishes and his brow furrows and he winces.

I’m rock fucking hard.

“The first night,” I tell him softly and I reach out and hold his head, rubbing his temples with the pads of my thumbs. “I asked you that the first night I brought you here.”

“Coming and staying,” he repeats in a strained tone, his teeth clenched together. “That’s what I did.”

He’s in pain.

“Justin... are you okay?”

He hands slide lower his fingers curl into the waistband of my underwear. He’s inches away from the tip of my cock, which is also grazing my waistband.

“You fucked me.”

I nod.

“And I loved it.”

He looks down at my throbbing cock, barely concealed.

“You still want to fuck me.”

I nod. It’s the only thing I can do. My body is frozen in fear and anticipation.

He tilts his head upward and suddenly his lips are on my neck and he’s sucking on the skin and I think I might actually fucking cum any second.

I’ve missed him so much. So fucking much.

“I want you to fuck me,” his hot breath rolls across my chest.

“No...” I croak out in a not at all believable protest.

My body instinctually pushes into him and his back presses into the metal door behind him. It rattles a little at the disturbance. This makes Justin moan a little for some reason I don’t understand. He suddenly moves his hands and before I realize what he’s doing he’s pulled my underwear half way down my legs and he’s got a hand wrapped around my cock.

I groan. It’s loud and guttural and completely uncontrollable.



My hands slam into the door on either side of his head so I can support myself if my knees buckle, which they are threatening to do.

He's staring down at his hand. At my dick. At the pre cum glistening on it.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he tells me and finally moves his eyes to my face. "I want you so badly."

"You don't," I argue and I know I should pull his hand off me. I just can't. "You want your memories..."

"I want you," he repeats and rocks up slightly to kiss my jawbone. "I know it's wrong. I just... you're all I think about."

He starts to pump my cock. My eyes snap shut and my head tilts back and I whimper.

I actually fucking whimper.

"You have a boyfriend," I hate myself for reminding him.

"I know," he responds. "but I need this. I need you. In ways I've never needed him."

I force my eyes to open. His blue ones are inky and dark and staring up at me with such longing and such.... Love?!

He still fucking loves me.

But how?

I slap his hand away from my cock and he looks startled.

"This is wrong." I say but I let him grab my face and pull it down and press his lips to mine anyway.

Kissing Justin is the most amazing thing on this planet. Better than any drink or drug. Better than blow jobs. Better than sex. Unless it's sex with Justin.

I've known that from the first moment it happened in this very apartment when he was a 17 year-old virgin and I was a sexual Olympian. And I've craved his kiss – longed for it – for so long that now that it's here... now that he's put his lips against mine again... wrong or not I can't pull away.

I press my body into him and push my tongue greedily between his lips.

He moans in response and his hand goes back around my cock and what's right or wrong doesn't matter anymore.

All that matters is this. His lips. His hands. His tongue.

"Fuck me," he pleads.

“Okay.”

## Chapter 11

*“Doesn’t it scare you... Your will is not as strong... As it used to be...” (Back to You by J. Mayer)*

His sheets are dark cool and supple. Egyptian cotton, I’m guessing. They feel soothing and oddly comforting against my bare skin.

I’m on my back, naked, still damp from the rain, staring up at him - this god-like human being who I can’t stay away from. I can’t stop thinking about and I can help wanting.

Needing.

He’s straddling me, his legs over my thighs, and he’s naked too. And his cock is rock hard pushing skyward. It’s even more beautiful than I remembered from those few seconds in the bathroom of Woody’s.

His hazel eyes are dark and he’s looking at me with a mixture of caution and lust. “You okay?”

“Stop asking me that,” I demand.

I reach out and grab his wrists and tug them. Hard.

He bends forward and I reach up and kiss his lips. He’s so fucking intoxicating. I can’t keep my tongue out of his mouth. It’s like he’s made from pure oxygen and I haven’t taken a breath in years.

He slides his body down even with mine and grinds into me. It’s possessive. It’s animalistic. And it’s completely instinctual.

He’s done this before. And my body responds like it remembers even if I don’t.

I grab at his hair, tugging slightly and grinding back up into him. Our cocks rub and bump each other.

“I need this,” I pant in his ear and nip the lobe because I know - I don’t know how but I know – it makes him crazy.

He groans.

I pull my legs apart and let his body slip between them.

Then I reach for his balls and roll him gently in my hand.

His full lips part as his mouth hangs open and his breath comes out in a grunt.

“Justin...” he manages to get out.

I start to suck on his earlobe again to try and stop him from changing his mind or asking me if I'm okay for the hundredth time.

He slaps my hand away from his balls but he allows me to keep sucking on his earlobe. He kisses my collarbone and I feel his hand slide down between my legs.

Then his finger grazes my hole and I tense slightly.

He tenses in return.

"It's okay..." I tell him and move my ass downward. "I want it. I want you."

His finger pushes into me. And I force myself to relax and his lips crash down on mine and then I feel him hit my prostate and I moan into his mouth. I buck up into him as he slides his finger in and out of me in a teasing rhythm.

I reach around and slide my hand toward his ass and start to reciprocate. He arches his back as my finger slides in and he hisses a little.

We finger each other until neither of us can take it anymore.

"Condom," he whispers close to my ear.

Without thinking twice I reach up and back with my left hand and grab a condom off the silver bowl sitting on the glass and chrome night side table. I didn't notice the bowl there earlier but I know its there.

I know.

He takes it from my hand and tears it open with his teeth. My head starts to pound lightly as images of him – this beautiful human – doing this exact same thing in this exact same position. Above me. Smiling slightly with lust and.... Love?

Is that love in his eyes?

Was there ever love in him – for me?

From what I've learned in the last 4 days in Pittsburgh, the answer to that really depends on who you ask. Deb Novotny says he loved me more than he loved anything in his life. Mel says he loved to fuck me but he loved to fuck anything – and everything.

But right now, as he slides the condom over his pretty cock, I don't care who is right. I just want him inside me.. because I feel like.... It's where I belong. Attached to him in body and spirit.

He gently takes my legs and places them on his shoulders.

I stare up at him expectantly.

"Just..." I swallow. "Take it easy."

“Like the first time,” he whispers hoarsely.

A vision takes over my sight again. His hair is slightly shorter. He looks younger... but just as wanton. He’s fucked me before. Like this.

And he’s the only one who has.

“Like that,” I say and let my hands glide over his chest.

He moves and grabs a small tube from beside the bed and then I feel cool lube at my opening. I try not to wince.

He smiles at that.

I’m nervous but not at all panicked the way I’ve been every time Aiden tries this. With Brian it feels right. It feels safe. It feels like this is exactly where I am supposed to be and what I’m supposed to be doing.

And then he’s hovering over me. My vision keeps playing tricks on me. I keep seeing this happening only.... From before. From years ago. Under blues lights and shadows and...

And then he slides into me slowly. Tenderly.

I clench, then sigh and relax.

“I’ve missed this so fucking much,” Brian says softly and his voice cracks slightly.

I closed my eyes and grasp the sheets. After a few seconds the burning sensation goes away and I buck up to meet his slow, calculated thrusts.

He captures my lips again and our rhythm intensifies. I reach for my cock between us and start pumping.

My eyes flutter open long enough to see his face – his beautiful face – and his eyes are closed and his lips are open and he’s sort of smiling....

I rub my cock harder and my balls start to tingle.

“I want to stay inside you forever...” he moans almost in audibly.

And I see him mumbling this.. just as lost in lust...sometime before... to me... here... and my head starts to pound again.

He pumps harder and he starts to groan – it comes from deep in his throat and rumbles up and then he says something... something I know he’s going to say even before the words leave his lips.

“I love you.”

And I moan at the pain in my head and the pleasure in my groin and...

I come as he comes. And the noise that escapes me is due in equal parts to the sexual release and the feeling that my head is being ripped in two...

And then everything goes black.

## **Chapter 12**

*"Should have smiled in that picture... If it's the last that I'll see of you..." (Back to You - J. Mayer)*

"Justin!" I wail for the 14<sup>th</sup> time.

I should call 911. I should move. To the phone in the other room. To my cell in the kitchen. I should DO SOMETHING.

But I don't want to leave him.

I can't leave him.

And I don't want to move him incase I make it worse.

"JUSTIN!"

His eyelashes flutter.

I slap his cheek lightly as I cradle him in my arms. "Justin! Can you hear me?"

More fluttering and then.... He's staring at me.

"Brian."

Relief rips through me so fast and strong that I almost pass out myself. I have to fight to stay conscious – and to keep from bursting into tears.

"Thank God. Oh thank fucking God!" I hug him to me and after a second he starts slapping at my back.

"Bri! I can't breathe!"

I let him go and he falls back onto the bed and we stare at each other.

"What happened?" he wants to know.

"How the fuck do I know?" I snap at him and stand shakily, finally removing the used condom from my softened dick and dropping it angrily into the trash by my bed.

"Did I faint?"

"I think so." I run a hand through my hair. "Fucking Christ Justin! You had me terrified."

"I'm okay," he assures me and then slowly starts to smile. "I'm better than okay."

He glances down happily at the cum that is smeared on his torso. I glare at him.

“I am never fucking you again.” I proclaim.

“What?” He lurches forward so he’s sitting up now. “You’re kidding right.”

“No I am not fucking kidding,” I shoot back hotly and storm into the bathroom.

I turn on the shower and wait impatiently for it to heat up. I lean against the marble counter because I’m still shaking and I think my knees might give out.

He’s in the doorway a second later.

“But I remembered.”

I lock eyes with him.

“Brian... *I remember!*” he says in a soft urgent tone a grin pulling his pretty lips upward.

“What?”

He nods excitedly. “I lied to my mother. Said I was staying at Daphne’s. But I spent the better part of the night roaming Liberty. And then just when I was about to give up you found me. By the street light.”

I let my mouth hang open but say nothing. I can’t I’m... speechless.

“You took me here,” he continues on, his words so precise and strong because he’s certain. He knows it’s a fact because he remembers. “You were kinda high and you got all naked and stuff and you poured water on your head and I was terrified. But I knew you were the most incredible thing I had ever seen and probably the most beautiful guy I ever would, so I had to let you. I had to have you be my first.”

I swallow even though there is absolutely no saliva in my mouth. I watch in awe as he makes his way across the small bathroom space towards me.

He stops directly in front of me and cocks his head to the side and smiles. Grins. And his nickname is finally well earned again.

“It hurt like hell at first – just like this time cuz I haven’t bottomed since you – but then it felt so good and so right and fuck you were so hot,” he pauses and his eyes grow large. “And you had a kid! That night! Gus! I named him. How come Lindsay didn’t have him when I was at their place?”

“He was with Deb,” I manage to sputter out. “Mel has a kid now too. A little girl. With Michael.”

“Mikey...” He laughs a little under his breath. “He was so jealous that night! Remember he tried to kill us in the jeep. Oh fuck... you...”

Suddenly his face clouds over and I grab his shoulders, scared he's going to black out again and hit the tile.

He reaches toward me and touches the side of my face and our eyes lock again. "You owned a jeep."

I nod.

"And we danced..."

My brows cinch together. Does he remember.... Everything?!

"I dream about you," he whispers and leans in and touches our lips together lightly for a second. "Brian I dream of you and me. And the jeep and... dancing.... To this old crooner song. In a concrete space like a warehouse or a..."

"Parking garage," I don't even recognize the voice that's coming out. It's strained and coarse.

"Parking garage?"

I nod weakly... guiltily.

"Chris Hobbs hit you with the bat in the parking garage of the hotel where your Prom was being held," I tell him fighting to keep my voice passive and even, "I had brought you down there... and I was leaving when... he came out of nowhere."

I can feel my bottom lip start to shake and I would rip it off if I could.

Justin steps closer and wraps his arms around me and holds me close. I bury my face in his neck and inhale his scent until my lungs feel like they may burst.

"I don't remember it," he confesses kissing my shoulder lightly. "But I remember you. I remember chasing you like a stalker my senior year."

I chuckle lightly at that. "You were determined."

"And you gave in," he counters with his own chuckle. "Every time."

"I felt bad not rewarding you for your efforts," I say simply.

"Please," he scoffs with a smirk. "You loved the attention."

"Twat," is all I can manage.

He pulls back and grabs my hand and guides me to the shower, opening the door and stepping in. I let him drag me with him.

We kiss lazily as the warm, welcoming water pours over us.

I run a hand through his wet hair and kiss his forehead. "How are you feeling?"

“Have a headache,” he admits kissing my collarbone. “But I feel better than I have in years.”

I feel another wave of relief at that.

He takes the soap and begins to wash my back languidly and I realize that I also feel better than I have in years. He’s here. With me. He remembers me and he wants to be with me.

He steps closer and I feel his wet bare skin against my back and something poking at the back of my thigh and I smile.

“We shouldn’t,” I say but I can’t help but smile. “Not in here. Not after how you reacted last time.”

“I promise I won’t faint,” he assured me and I can hear the grin in the little twat’s voice without turning around to see it on his face. “And if you let me top you then I’ll just collapse onto your back anyway. That’s safe enough.”

I laugh at that but he pushes into me anyway and I feel his cock slip between my soapy cheeks. I arch my back to get away from him.

“That’s not going to help you remember,” I warn him. “I never let you do that.”

“Then maybe it’s time to make new memories...” his breath is warm against the back of my ear and his finger slips inside me and I hate myself for pushing back to meet it.

“Justin?!”

The voice is muffled but even through the pounding of the shower water and the cavernous echo of my loft I recognize it instantly.

So does he.

“Fuck! That’s my mom!”

The next 20 seconds is a clumsy race to get out of the shower and cover as much of ourselves as possible. It’s a race we ultimately lose.

Before either of us has a towel secured around our waists Jennifer Taylor is standing in the bathroom doorway, eyes wide, mouth agape, hand to chest.

Justin uses the towel to cover himself awkwardly. I sigh, roll my eyes and stand there naked.

“Brian,” she says her voice full of bitterness.

“Jennifer.”

“You promised.” She hisses her voice shaking. “You said you’d stay away from him!”

Justin steps toward her. “Mom. He didn’t do anything wrong!”



Jennifer shakes her head and storms back through the bedroom. Justin stumbles after her stopping briefly to throw back on his underwear and pants and grab his shirt.

I finally tie the towel around my waist and slowly follow. I have no idea why I don't just finish my shower. I have nothing I can add to this family moment – nothing good at least.

But for some reason I follow anyway.

“Brian is once again taking advantage of you,” Jennifer tells her son.

I watch Justin roll his eyes and sigh. “He’s not. He never was.”

“Is that what he tells you?” she sneers and its completely unattractive on her.

“That’s what I know, mom,” Justin replies firmly. “I remember.”

“You....” Her voice trails off.

Justin nods. Her eyes move to mine. I nod.

“How much?”

“A lot.”

“The attack?”

He shakes his head. “Not yet. But maybe soon.”

She sighs and I have no idea if it’s in relief or disappointment. She’s scared – just like she always has been – that remembering the attack will be too much for him. I was too, but not now. Now I think Justin can handle anything. Justin and I can handle anything – together.

“What about New York?” Jennifer asks suddenly. “Do you remember New York? And your life there?”

Justin glances at me confused and then back at his mother. “Yeah.”

“And Aiden. Do you remember your boyfriend Justin?” she wants to know. “The man you live with?”

Ouch. That hurts.

Justin nods hesitantly.

“Because he’s in your hotel room right now.”

“What?” I say before Justin can get the same word out.

Jennifer ignores me completely and keeps her gaze on her son. “He says you haven’t called in almost 2 days. And he was so beside himself with worry I agreed to come here with him.”

Justin's shoulders sag slightly. "Aiden is here?"

Jennifer nods.

He turns towards me and I turn my back on him and walk toward the windows – and the booze cart.

I wave my hand in the air. "See ya."

"Brian."

"Go," I command with no emotion in my voice. "Your boyfriend awaits."

"But–"

"No buts," I insist. "I'll see ya around."

"You'll see me around?!" He sounds hurt. But I'm fine with that. Because I'm hurt.

We stare at each other for a moment and then his mother opens the loft door and I see a wave of something run through him briefly before he follows her out and slams it shut.

I sigh and grab a new bottle of Crown.

I know I have to get at least half drunk in order not to think about Justin alone in a hotel room with his boyfriend.

Now he's got memories. Our memories. New and old.

Will it be enough?

## **Chapter 13**

*"Over you... I'm never over you..." (Back to You by J. Mayer)*

He's staring at me. That is until I look up and then he averts his eyes, focusing on the poached eggs and toast in front of him.

I sigh.

"Sorry."

"For what?" I ask.

"I don't know," he admits, still not looking up. "But whatever I did that has you like this... I'm sorry."

I quiver of guilt runs through me.

"Aiden..." I run a hand through my hair before reaching over and touching his hand across the booth. "You haven't done anything. I'm just... having a hard time."

He finally lifts his eyes to mine and they're soft and caring and he's put up with so fucking much bullshit from me... I am a fucking horrible human being for cheating on him. And even worse for not being able to tell him.

"I don't know what you must be going through," he admits softly and he curls his fingers around mine. "But I need you to know, I want to help you through this."

"I know. It's just not something you can help with," I tell him.

His eyes darken and I can literally see the disappointment on his face. "Doesn't me just being here help?"

I open my mouth to speak – not that I know what to say. And before I have to say anything the front door of the diner jingles and Brian Kinney walks in.

He's dressed in a camel colored cashmere dress coat. A gorgeous red tie peeking out. He's hair is perfectly styled, close to his head on the sides but spiked and defiant in the front.

Almost every set of gay male eyes in the place set themselves on him to drink in the sheer hotness.

But his eyes find only mine.

I swallow hard and my hand slips from Aiden's and makes its way back into my lap.

Aiden turns toward the focus of my eyes.

He turns back. "Who is he?"

Brian starts to walk toward us. Before I know it he's standing beside the table, his eyes still locked on mine.

He's so stunning and intense and his eyes are so green and clear and if this was less than 24 hours ago I would stand up and wrap my arms around his neck and push my tongue into his mouth.

But things have changed.

And Brian Kinney doesn't seem to give a fuck.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Fine. You?"

"Fine."

"Umm Justin?"

I glance at Aiden and back to Brian. I say nothing so finally Brian turns to face Aiden.

“Hi,” he says and extends his hand. “I’m Brian Kinney.”

“Hi,” Aiden shakes his hand. “Aiden Freeman.”

Brian nods tersely and asks. “Do you love him?”

“Brian.” I say stunned.

He ignores me. Aiden glances at me but also ignores me.

“Yes,” Aiden answers simply. “Very much.”

Brian stares at him a little longer then nods again. He turns and starts to walk away. I stand up and start to follow him and call his name but he ignores me and continues on out the door without even a second glance.

Aiden stands too and puts a hand on my shoulder. “What the hell was that?”

“That was Brian Kinney,” I say quietly. “Doing what he does best. Walking away.”

I turn slowly and find Aiden staring at me with this weird look on his face. “You remember him?”

I lower my eyes guiltily. “I never forgot him. I dreamed about him the whole time.”

“Oh,” Aiden says, shocked. He pauses and then says the word again but with a sad realization. “Oh.”

I take his hand in mine. It’s all I can do.

He pulls away. “We have to get to court.”

I follow along silently as he storms out of the diner. Right now facing Chris Hobbs seems like the easy option.

How fucked up is that?

## **Chapter 14**

*“Leave the light on... I’ll never give up on you...” (Back to You by J. Mayer)*

I’m sitting at my desk – staring at a new website our interactive team put together for Brown Athletics and pretending to scrutinize it when in all honestly I don’t give a fuck.

And then she storms in.

No announcement.

No warning.

And now I know what Justin must feel like with the past colliding with the present.

This reminds me of the time she stormed in here with a bag of his clothes and a check. Because Justin's expensive.

The memory would make me smile if she still didn't look like she wanted to kill me. And if my heart didn't feel like it was in pieces in my Gucci shoes.

"You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" she starts in, her delicate hand slicing through the air. "You had to suck him back in."

"He showed up here without invitation or warning," I argue back, rising to my feet. "And then he showed up at my fucking loft and wouldn't leave."

"So you fucked him. Again."

I roll my eyes. "He practically begged me to."

She cringes at that.

"Jennifer, he remembers. The good things," I remind her. "And he's okay."

"He just screwed up everything he's built over the last five years," she's yelling now. "He's not okay."

"He's screwed nothing up," I reply. "I just saw him with Avery at the diner. They were even holding hands."

She seems to soften a little at that, the creases in her forehead smoothing and her blue eyes – so much like her sons – lighten slightly.

"Aiden," she corrects because she actually thinks I don't know. Then she sighs. "But you slept with him."

"I won't tell if you won't," I can't help but snark.

"Justin will tell," She informs me. "Because Justin will leave Aiden for you."

I stare at her blankly. Willing the warmth bubbling in my chest not to show in my face. Oh fuck if only she were right. I want her to be right.

"I walked away and he won't forgive that," I remind her. "Let you take him off to Jersey for a new life."

"Because you cared," she reminds me back.

I shrug and give her a pathetic smirk. "I won't tell if you don't."

Suddenly her cellphone goes off and she digs in her purse while I listen to Michael Jackson's Rock with You. She seems embarrassed.

“Justin likes to download ringtones for me,” she explains with a bit of a smile. “A few months ago it was Gloria Gaynor’s I will Survive. Apparently he thinks I’m a disco nut.”

She says half of the word hello and then falls silent, her mouth hanging open.

“Oh my god,” she whispers. “Is he okay? Where is he? Oh my god no.”

I step closer. It’s Justin. I know it’s Justin.

“It’s okay Aiden. I’ll be right there.” She flips her cell shut and throws it back in her bag and starts almost running out of my office.

I’m on her heels.

She spins at the elevator. “Brian go away.”

“If this has to do with Justin,” I tell her hotly. “I’m going with you.”

“No.”

“Fuck Jennifer I care about him.” I yell and then take a deep breath and say more softly. “I might be able to help.”

She hesitates but doesn’t stop me when I step in with her.

“He’s at the hospital,” she tells me. “He went to go see the victim after court.”

“Why the fuck would you let him do that?!”

She looks irate. “I didn’t know he was doing that! He’s a grown man Brian. I can’t control him.”

“Irony,” I spit out but bite my tongue.

We don’t speak the whole way to St Paul’s but I don’t know if it’s because she’s furious with me or because my driving is scaring the crap out of her.

The first thing we see when we burst in to emergency is What’s-His-Face. He starts towards Jennifer and grabs her in a hug and whispers, “He’s fine. They’ve given him some painkiller and a mild sedative.”

I sigh. “What room?”

“Why is he here?” Alden or whatever asks Jennifer.

“I had no choice,” Jennifer offers back and I roll my eyes.

“Where is he?” I repeat.

Then I see Mel and Lindsay and Deb all start toward me with various expressions on their faces. Lindsay looks concerned, Mel annoyed, Deb sympathetic.

“I think he needs me not you right now,” Allen informs me with no arrogance, just protectiveness. He loves Justin. He wants what’s best for him and he doesn’t think that’s me.

He’s probably right.

But I don’t give a fuck.

“I want to see him,” I say calmly. “I won’t fuck him up.”

“You always fuck him up,” Mel grumbles. “If you’d left well enough alone...”

“Mel!” Lindsay barks.

“Room 3C,” Deb pipes in and points down the hallway to her left.

Aiden and Jennifer shoot her very angry glares to which Deb stares back just as perturbed. She points at Alvin or whatever the fuck.

“You seem adorable but you’re in over your head if you think you can stop this freight train of a romance,” she tells him simply and she nods at Jennifer. “And I know you know it too. I know you’ve always known it. No matter how misguided you’ve become.”

I don’t wait around to hear Jennifer or Allan’s reaction to Deb’s brutally honest words. I simply stride down the hallway to room 3C.

When I get there Justin is awake sitting up in his bed in a hospital gown with an IV strapped to his arm. And he’s arguing, politely, with the doctor.

“Well,” I hear the doctor reason. “If that’s the case, then the test results will tell us that too and you’ll be outta here before nightfall.”

“But I don’t need tests,” he insists. “And I don’t need the shrink you’re also going to send in here.”

“Justin,” I say his name softly – like a parent – which judging by his reaction he doesn’t like to hear. I don’t like to sound that way either so we’re even.

The doctor nods at me and exits the room promising Justin that he’ll move things along as fast as possible.

Once alone, we stare at each other unblinking for several minutes until I finally break the silence.

“How’re you feeling?”

“Fantastic,” he lifts his arm with the IV. “They gave me meds for the pain.”

I nod.

He holds my eye, his square chin, upward as if in defiance. “What are you doing here?”

“I was with your mom when she found out you were here.”

“So what are you doing here?”

I blink.

“She’s a big girl,” he reminds me. “Perfectly capable of finding her way to a hospital I spent months in. You did not have to come.”

His last sentence is said slowly and over-enunciated. He is pissed.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay,” I offer up rather lamely. “See for myself.”

“Because you... *care*?” he says the last word like it’s some rare disgusting venereal disease.

I don’t answer him and it infuriates him just like I expect. It infuriates me. I’m a total asshole.

But what good are my feelings when he’s moved on?

Why does he want me to parade them around like a fucking pity party. Look at me! Brian Kinney – in love with a man who loves someone else! Everyone stare at the idiot who let the only man he’ll ever love move on without him!

I swallow. He watches me intently.

“I’m fine,” he spits out. “Go.”

“Justin...”

“What?” he snaps. “Stop being such a drama queen?”

I smile awkwardly. “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

“I was always a drama queen Brian. Right from the beginning,” he reminds me. “Remember how I cried when you told me you didn’t believe in love, only fucking? Remember how I virtually begged you to go to prom?”

I nod and then cock my head. I’m confused. Does he... is this.... Memories?

He’s staring at me with furious blue eyes. “Maybe if I hadn’t been such a drama queen then none of this would have happened. Maybe you wouldn’t have felt guilty into going to prom and I wouldn’t have created that big dramatic dance scene and it wouldn’t have pissed off Hobbs...”

“Justin...” his name drops off my tongue in a hoarse whisper.

“And maybe if I wasn’t lost in all that silly romantic fluff in that parking garage I would have seen Hobbs coming and I would have been able to duck,” he takes a deep ragged breath. “And don’t worry I can see why you let me go. No one needs that kind of princess in their lives.”



I take a step toward him and open my mouth to speak – to protest. To tell him that he’s an idiot. That he didn’t beg me to go to prom with him and I didn’t feel guilty. I felt proud... happy to be his date. To show him off to everyone. To make him feel as special as he was. And I was the one who should have seen Hobbs coming. I was the one who should have stopped him. I was the one who failed.

But before I can say anything at all Jennifer is pushing past me and What’s-His-Face is with her. They surround Justin, hovering over him, blocking him from my view and giving me no chance to tell him how it really was. Or how it still is.

And then I hear Justin say “I remember mom. Everything.”

And as a fearful silence falls over the room I walk out. And I head back to my car without stopping at Deb’s concerned call. Without acknowledging Lindsay’s soft plea for me to wait. Without even throwing a good insult toward Mel.

I just go. Back to work. Back to my life. Back to... nothing.

## **Chapter 15**

*“But forgive me, love... I can’t turn and walk away...” (Back to You by J. Mayer)*

The headache is still there but barely. Nothing like it had been when the memories came rushing back as I looked at that poor guy – Dean – lying battered in his bed.

I stood motionless watching him and suddenly I my hearing started to disappear – everything got fuzzy and distorted and then... I know it’s crazy but I started to feel his pain. My head started to pound as I looked at his bandages on my skull and then my jaw throbbed when I looked at his facial bruises. And then I heard a sound – a loud cracking sound like I heard in my dreams but only this time it was so real... and I flinched and closed my eyes and got dizzy.

And then I saw it.

His angry face and the bat is coming at me and I hear...

Brian.

And then the pain overwhelmed me and I crumbled and I could hear Aiden call my name and feel his arms around me but I could do nothing but groan.

But as the doctors came rushing and they got me up on a gurney my brain became flooded with memories. My father yelling at me... hitting me in the driveway... my mom taking me the to museum... trying hard to stay supportive... spending hours in my bedroom drawing.... Brian.

And the dance.... They way he showed up out of nowhere and just... took my breath away. I’d never been so in love or felt so loved as I did with him on that dance floor. By the Jeep afterward... the look in his eyes. The feel of that soft silk around my neck.... His lips on mine.

I hear squeaking coming down the hard marble floors of the old courthouse and glance up to see Daphne stalking towards me. She's dressed in comfortable shoes and scrubs. Her hair is pulled back into a tight low ponytail and she's smiling despite bags under her eyes.

"You look like shit," I can't help but tell her with a smile. "Happy shit, but shit."

"Residency is a bitch," she yawns and playfully punches me in the shoulder. "But I hear you've had your own hospital visit."

I nod. "I remember. It all."

She nods. "And..."

"And I want to testify," I tell her quietly. "I want to finally say everything I couldn't before. I want to help put Chris Hobbs away forever."

Daphne nods. "And..."

I stare at her and wrinkle my nose in confusion. "And...?"

She sighs dramatically and rolls her eyes. "And what the fuck are you feeling? What about... your life?"

I say nothing for a minute. "My life is what it is, Daph. Nothing has changed."

She seems to consider this, her big brown eyes soft and reflective. Then she nods.

"Yeah. I guess that's why I'm asking," she says to me with a quirky mischievous smile. "Cuz nothing has changed. You're still Justin Taylor and he's still Brian Kinney and you're both still madly in love with each other. So what now?"

I shake my head. Daphne may be right. I mean I know she's half right. I am still so deeply and desperately in love with him, I'm embarrassed. But is he really in love with me? On the surface I'd say no fucking way, but something deep inside me knows that he is. He always has been. But if he'll never admit it, never show it at all – then does it even count?

"I don't want to talk about him," I tell her and I mean it. "I didn't ask you to meet me so we could talk about my fucked up love life. I need your help testifying."

She blinks, stunned. "You get up on the stand and take an oath and speak."

I shake my head. "The shrink at the hospital when I had my attack said she didn't think I should. I want you to override her decision."

"Justin," she looks skeptical. "I'm an intern. I have no power and besides I'm going to specialize in brain trauma not psychiatry and I'm way too close to you. It's a conflict of interest."

"Daph," my voice is so filled with urgency I almost don't recognize it. "He has to go to jail."

She nods. "I'm sure Mel can put him there even without your testimony."

“Maybe,” I admit. “but maybe not. And I need to do this.”

She looks conflicted. “I wish I could help Justin but...”

Mel is charging down the hall toward us – my mom and Aiden right behind her. She announces the trial is about to start and we all move into the courtroom without another word.

Aiden sits on my left and holds my hand the entire time. It makes me feel claustrophobic. I try desperately to pay attention to the trial – to the defence attorney cross-examining the doctor who was in emergency when Dean was rushed in. He’s trying desperately to make his still-life-threatening injuries seem overblown.

I try not to get too upset about it but then for some reason I don’t understand, but that makes me angry anyway, Brian waltzes into the courtroom. He ignores all the stares and slides into the row behind me.

An hour later Mel is questioning some Frat Boy Douchebag who was there at the bar and watched the “gay kid” virtually “molest” Hobbs.

“Asshat.”

I hear Brian’s low, growling whisper from the row behind me and I can’t help but smirk. Aiden stares at me with a sad look on his face and I pull the smile off mine and stare straight ahead then squeeze his hand out of guilt.

The judge calls recess and the lot of us – my Pittsburgh friends and my New York friend... I mean boyfriend.

We all stand there looking at each other silently in the wide, old oak and marble hallway outside the courtroom. I fight like hell to keep my eyes off Brian. It’s where they naturally want to focus, I realize with a mix of fear and awe.

Aiden’s hand around mine feels like a handcuff, keeping me somewhere I don’t want to be.

I sigh and turn to look at Mel who seems really, really stressed.

“That wasn’t good,” I say and she looks at me, her chocolate eyes somber. “Those witnesses are fucking us aren’t they.”

“Please,” Brian says unimpressed and I’m secretly glad he spoke so I can look at him and not feel guilty... as guilty. “A homophobic douche bag frat boy and an overworked, disgruntled emergency doc. Fuck that.”

“Unfortunately that frat boy may be a lackey construction worker but he is the son of a well respected politician,” Mel explains. “And the doctor is a credible witness. At least to the judge who is a bigger homophobe than Regular Roy.”

“Who’s Regular Roy?” I ask and they all turn to me with a weird look on their faces.

Brian clears his throat. "He was the judge on your case. The one who made it possible for Hobbs to put this kid in the hospital too."

"The one who had his kiester glued to a toilet seat by.... "Debbie's eyes dart to Brian. "Someone."

I glance at Brian who won't meet my gaze. Or anyone's.

"Well the jury won't be able to blow me off," I say sounding confident and feeling it too. There is no way anyone will not be moved by my story. By the pain I went through. By the years I lost. By... everything I lost.

"Justin, honey," my mother starts in like I knew she would. "The doctor said that it would be detrimental to –"

"I'm fine mom," I say tersely. "I want to do this and it needs to be done."

"J..." Aiden says softly and tightens his grip on my hand. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"He's not 12," Brian pipes in hotly. "He can make his own decisions. For once."

"Brian!" My mom says his name with venom.

"He makes his own decisions but unlike you, we care about him and we're not going to let him hurt himself," Aiden snaps and finally lets go of my hand only so he can take a menacing step toward Brian.

I jump in-between them as Lindsay lays a gentle hand on Brian's shoulder and my mom does the same to Aiden.

"I'm testifying," I say firmly.

"Justin, the defense will just bring in some shrink to say you're in no shape to be taken seriously," Mel warns me.

"Yeah but don't you think it might at least make a difference with some of the jurors?" I question.

"And when I testify and back him up," Daphne adds. "When I explain how Hobbs has been after Justin for months and how I saw him leave the dance right after Justin..."

Mel nods hesitantly. "Yeah it might make a difference."

"I don't think it's a good idea." My mother argues flatly, but I ignore her.

"Call me next," I tell Melanie and she simply nods.

Aiden looks at me like I just tore his heart out and it hurts. I don't want to hurt him, but I have to do this. And as I glance at Brian and his beautiful hazel eyes meet mine I realize that if he knew my real thoughts and actions over the last few days, Aiden's heart wouldn't just be torn out of his chest it would be torn to pieces.

But somehow, I don't feel any pain or guilt for loving Brian. And if he would only own up to loving me, I'd never look back.

## Chapter 16

*"Your will is not as strong...As it used to be..." (Back to You by John Mayer)*

Daphne testifies first. I don't know what the fuck Mel's strategy is on this but I don't ask either. If she asked me why I used a certain color in an ad campaign I'd tell her to go fuck herself and I would expect the same response if I asked her about this. Besides, as much as that Muncher annoys the crap out of me, she's a good... dare I say great... lawyer and I trust her judgment.

So Daphne takes the stand first and talks about the way Chris Hobbs bullied everyone at their school. The way, after one certain day in detention, he turned most of his vicious attention to Justin Taylor. Justin had told her that it was because they'd had a sexual encounter. The defense objects to that one, calling it hearsay.

Daphne rolls her eyes and continues on to talk about prom night. How I showed up and Justin "Lit up like a Christmas tree." How beautiful we looked and how we moved....

I can't keep my brain from moving back in time to those moments. They hurt. Everything about that night hurts, which is an irony I never get past. Because that night – when it was happening – was anything but painful. It was the most warm, beautiful, amazing feeling I've ever felt.

God the look in his beautiful blue eyes.... The look he had for me... No one, not even Mikey, has looked at me that way. No one has made me feel that loved.

And look where it got us?

Daphne finishes testifying and the defense attorney tries to pick apart her story as hearsay and the blatherings of a young, naive schoolgirl to which Daphne quickly calls him a homophobe.

I can hardly breathe as Mel calls his name and he stands in front of me and starts toward the witness stand.

My heart is hammering in my chest and I suddenly feel sick with nervousness.

If something happens to him – if this is too much for him to handle – I'll never forgive myself for not stopping him from doing this.

Never.

As the questioning begins, I suddenly understand Mel's strategy. She put Daphne up first because she knew the defense lawyer would use hearsay as a major argument. Daphne wasn't Justin. All of Daphne's thoughts or feeling on the events were just her opinions. So then when she calls Justin up – and Justin backs up every word of what Daphne expressed, the defense lawyer's argument is dead in the water.

Sure, he'll take a new tactic – like claiming Justin isn't fit to testify – but it only makes him look like he's grasping at straws. And if the jury is smart – which is a big if – they'll see right thru it.

God I hope they're smart.

Most of Mel's questions start with "Daphne Chanders stated" and ends with "Is that true?"

And he backs up everything in vivid, glorious, sometimes heart-wrenching detail. What I was wearing, how we danced, what song we danced to, how it felt – in his words "even more amazing than it looked."

I avert my eyes from Alden who is glancing over his shoulder at me like a kicked puppy. Instead I turn to watch Chris Hobbs. He's fidgeting in his seat and getting redder and redder.

Mel asks about the supposed sexual encounter and Justin gives so much detail I can picture the whole equipment room encounter like I'm watching it on a porn site.

When it's finally the defense attorney's shot at cross-examination he looks almost as furious as Hobbs himself. He adjusts his tie and lays into Justin.

"You have a brain disorder correct?"

"No," Justin corrects calmly. "I had some problems with long term memory due to Chris Hobbs hitting me in the head with a bat, but they're gone now."

"We're just supposed to believe that?" sneers the lawyer. "I think it's more likely someone fed you information to repeat."

"Actually, there's doctors on staff at St. Paul's right here in Pittsburgh that can assure you I have my memories back. They are real and they are vivid." Justin assures him confidently. "And I can see your client swinging the baseball bat at my temple. I see the hate in his eyes and-"

"Correct me if I'm wrong Mr. Taylor," the defense asshole interrupts. "But are you not a successful artist in New York City now?"

Confusion flickers across his gorgeous features. "I am doing well, yes."

"Did you always want to be an artist?"

He nods and adds. "Yes. Since I was a child."

The defense attorney turns and glances at the jury with a sorta smirk and a nod. I have no fucking idea what special moment he thinks they just shared. The look makes me want to smack him.

"And is your boyfriend not an equally successful up-and-coming advertising executive at one of the most world renowned firms?" he asks with that cocky smirk still in place.

Adrian is a fucking ad man? Seriously? I would laugh if I could right now.

“Yeah. So?” Justin is getting irritated. He starts fidgeting in his seat.

He glances at me and I give him a small encouraging nod and mouth the word. “Easy.”

He seems to get it and stops fidgeting.

“So what exactly did you lose, Mr. Taylor?” the lawyer wants to know. “I mean your life seems pretty complete. Your hand works well enough that you could pursue your life long dream successfully and your boyfriend is successful and you just bought a loft. What exactly did Mr. Hobbs take that was so important?”

Justin blinks.

The courtroom is so quiet that you can almost hear people’s heart’s beating. Mine in particular is pounding with rage.

“You’re fucking kidding right?” Justin snaps.

“Mr. Taylor...” the judge warns.

“What did he take?” Justin repeats the asinine question. “Chris Hobbs took my *life*. He took my innocence, my self-worth, my confidence, my family, my home, and my friends. He took away the love of my life.”

He stares straight at me for a second and then turns hard eyes on the attorney.

“I became the best homosexual I could be *despite* Chris Hobbs, not because of him. And I know... I’ll always know... that if he hadn’t tried to *kill* me...” the fucktard lawyer yells out an objection but Justin keeps going anyway. “I would have become *more*. I would have been happier, stronger, smarter, more successful than I am right now. That’s what your homophobic, violent, mentally unbalanced client took from me and it’s what he’s taken from Dean Barrett.”

“Objection!!!” The lawyer yells one more time. “I want his tirade removed from the record.”

The judge stares at Justin and then back at the defense lawyer. He clears his throat and simply shakes his head. “Unfortunately Mr. Taylor is simply answering your question, Mr. Anderson. Objection over-ruled, but jury please keep in mind Mr. Hobbs was never convicted of trying to kill Mr. Taylor.”

The Judge, who I am liking way more than Regular Roy, adjourns for the day and Justin leaves the stand with his shoulders back, head up and a tiny triumphant smile on his lips.

Outside the courthouse friends and family and Alvin engulf him.

I quietly slink away.

When I get home, I crack open the Beam. But this time my drinking isn’t in pain. I’m celebrating. I’m proud of that little shit. He nailed Chris Hobbs to the wall. He did something

good for the kid in the hospital and more importantly, he brought closure – at least a little bit – to his own attack.

I often wondered what it was like for him – out there, making his way knowing that there was a piece of his life he might not be able to get back and the guy who did it was walking free. Not only walking free, but Justin never had his day in court. His chance to confront Hobbs.

Now he had that. No matter what happened now, Justin tried his best. He spoke out. He defended himself and told the world what that monster had done to him.

I'm smiling as I order Chinese and flip on the stereo opting for some old Fleetwood Mac. Most fags would have me turn in my queer badge for listening to this stuff but I love it when I'm smoking up.

I throw myself down on an oversized, overstuffed pillow, take a sip from the Beam bottle and reach for my silver bowl and rolling papers.

And then he knocks.

I know it's him.

I don't know whether to sigh or smile.

I kinda do both.

He knocks again.

"Brian."

"It's open," I call back trying to ignore the shiver down my spine at the sound of his voice calling my name.

He slides it open and leans in the open frame, smiling and staring.

"I just wanted to say thank you," he tells me as I stand up and start to walk slowly toward the door. "For sticking up for me when I wanted to testify."

I shrug my shoulders, now clad only in a wifebeater. "I knew you could handle it."

He nods and stares at his feet for a second before adding. "But you didn't think I could handle staying in Pitts after the attack?"

I stop at the wood pillar that's closest to my front door and lean against it, facing him. I sigh.

"I didn't think your mom could handle it," I admit. "And you needed her to be a rock, not a puddle."

He considers my words and nods slightly. "So you did it for her?"

I nod slightly. "And for you. You deserved a future that wasn't haunted by a past you couldn't remember."



He smiles sadly at that and tips his head so his left temple is leaning on the doorframe. "I was haunted anyway."

"I'm sorry."

We stare at each other. He swallows and licks his lips. I want to lick his lips too...

"My mother and Aiden are heading back to New York tomorrow," He tells me. "They want me to go with them."

I nod.

I don't know what else to do. This isn't a question. It's not an invitation. It's a simple statement of fact.

He takes a deep breath. "So... I guess this is good bye."

I'm suddenly so sad it's almost overwhelming. It actually makes my body feel heavy and weak. I lean into the pillar even more and drop my head to examine the oak floor beneath me.

"I'm sure we'll..." I swallow. Hard. "Run into each other again or something."

"Maybe," he says in a whisper. "Or something."

I lift my head and meet his gaze. His blue eyes are swimming. He's trying defiantly not to cry. It's kinda working. His jaw is strong, and his face is emotionless – except for the water in his eyes.

The sight makes me wanna cry which then makes me feel panicked.

I let him walk away. I wanted him to be happy somewhere else. I don't get to take that from him now.

"Would you stay in touch?" he asks simply. "I mean an occasional email or something?"

"Maybe. I'm not all that big into cyber shit," I say honestly. "And you've got your business and your... boyfriend. I'm pretty sure you'll be busy."

He turns his eyes away.

"But when I get promoted at Vanguard and take over for Gardner, I'm sure business will take me to the big apple at some point," I tell him feeling like a chump for chasing him. After all, I sent him away. "Maybe we could do dinner or.. something."

He shrugs.

"Or you could..." I wish I'd already had a joint in me. Then maybe I wouldn't be about to say what I'm about to say. Maybe the pain wouldn't feel so deep. "You could dump your boyfriend and we could have sex-filled weekend visits every couple of weeks."

He catches my eye again and then grins.

Fucking beams.

“You’re kidding right?”

“Not so much,” I shrug and smirk. “I mean lets face it. He’s a poor stand in.”

“What?”

“Ad man?”

“His profession is not why I dated him,” Justin objects but all I hear is the word dated as opposed to dating. Past tense never sounded so sweet.

“Isn’t it?” I ask and arch an eyebrow. He grins bigger even though I know he’s trying not to. The eyebrow always gets him. “And you own a loft?”

He laughs guiltily now. “Look I can’t be responsible for what repressed memories make me do. If I don’t know I have them I can’t be at fault.”

I smile. “You got me there.”

He grows serious for a second. “He’s a good guy. He’s going to get hurt.”

“Yeah,” I nod. “That sucks. But I think he might see it coming.”

“Yeah after I told a room full of people Chris Hobbs had cost me the love of my life.”

We stare at each other, both smiling and both paralyzed by the sudden emotional electricity in the air between us.

I see the Chinese food delivery guy climbing the stairs behind Justin. I lean in next to Justin in the doorway, hand the guy a twenty and take the paper bag from him. He leaves and Justin and I are face-to-face in the doorway each leaning on a different side.

“Hungry?” I ask and hold up the food.

I can’t help but tip my head forward and take a deep breath of his scent, my nose tickles his earlobe.

“For you?” he whispers his breath on my neck. “Always.”

I drop the bag of food and grab his face pulling it to mine until our lips are on each other.

I would give up weed, food, Beam and all my vices if I could just have this – have him – forever.

## Chapter 17

*"I tired to forget you... I tried to stay away... But it's too late."* (Back to You by J. Mayer)

"This is right," I whisper against the sweaty flesh of his shoulder.

He exhales slowly and grunts what I assume is his agreement.

"I feel whole here." I tell him and he kisses my neck lightly.

He rolls to my left gently, carefully holding on to the end of the condom around his semi-hard dick to make sure he takes it with him.

I feel a whoosh of cool air and like I'm suddenly empty – and I am physically. It's funny because with Aiden, I can get out of him fast enough when we're done fucking. I just need to clean up and the only way I can relax after sex is with a smoke and some alone time.

But here... now.... Brian lies on top of me for endless minutes after we come. And I fucking love it. And when he pulls out of me I want to groan in protest. I want to touch him or be touched by him every waking moment of my life. I never felt that with Aiden.

I didn't know it was possible to feel that with anyone. To feel so close.

Maybe it wasn't before... when I was still missing pieces.

"I feel like... I belong." I admit softly.

His chestnut hair hits the pillow, all askew, and his eyes – more green than hazel now – try to blink away their desire and his post-orgasm euphoria.

He reaches out and brushes my hair from my forehead. "That's because you do, Sunshine."

I smile.

He smiles back, rolls over and grabs the cigarettes from the coffee table as he snaps the condom from his cock and tosses it in the general direction of the trash.

After he lights his smoke, takes a long deep drag and exhales, he offers it to me. I smile but shake my head.

"So..." I say quietly and stretch slightly. "What now?"

He glances at me and kinda shrugs his shoulder. "I guess we have to figure something out."

I nod and watch him as he sits up from our position on the couch cushions on the floor. That's as far as we'd made it – from the door to the couch – before we were naked and he was bending me over. Somehow in all the writhing and sucking and grabbing and pounding the cushions ended up on the floor along with our spent bodies.

I don't know exactly how. What I do know is I lose all coherent thought when Brian Kinney's cock is sliding into me and his lips are on the back of my neck and...

"We could eat," he suggests and motions toward the Chinese take out still on the floor by the door.

I laugh. "Not hungry."

He flops back beside me. "Me either."

He takes another long drag. "I guess maybe you have to get back to the hotel or whatever."

I turn my head to stare at his profile. He glances at me and then reaches for the ashtray on the coffee table. "I mean you have to probably go back to New York with your... mom. And you know.... Deal with stuff."

I know on some level that he's right. My life might feel amazing right this very second but it is, in all honestly, a pretty big colossal mess. I mean I lived with Aiden and now... that will have to change. And if that wasn't a big enough upset in my everyday dynamic – and Aiden's – he had become part of the family. It would affect my mother – so will me bouncing back and forth between here and there, which will most likely happen. And then there was my career. It was just really starting to get off the ground. Would his screw it up?

"I have some things to figure out," I admit. "But maybe I can just stay here a while longer."

He smiles. "That's called avoidance. That's not going to solve anything."

Yeah. I know. Damnit.

He butts out the smoke lays flat on his back. I let my eyes glide over his profile, lingering on his beautiful soft cock. My heart rates jumps and my balls tingle and I have to avert my eyes.

I roll onto my stomach to hide my emerging hard-on and stare at him sideways.

"You need to go and figure it all out," he encourages. "Do what you need to do and then we'll see each other again in a few months when things have settled."

I freeze.

"A few months?!"

He can tell by my tone I'm not impressed. He glances at me again.

"Justin," he says in a warning tone. "It's not going to be easy or simple. Or fast."

"No," I agree. "It's going to be messy and complicated, but not seeing you for months isn't going to make it easier either."

"But it could make it harder if we don't take our time," he replies as he rolls over on his side and props his head up on his hand. "Your mom is going to hate me, more than she already

does that is. And Aiden... you can't just expect him to disappear. He's going to be in and out of your life for a bit."

"So?" It's one of those completely juvenile, 8 year old come backs but it's all I've got.

"Justin you're not 6," he reminds me instantly which only fuels my anger. "Besides, I'm taking over for Gardner as President of Vanguard and I won't need any distractions in the first little while. It'll be better for both of us."

I sit up and stare at him.

"It's not like we won't talk or keep in touch," he argues watching my body become more rigid and my face more angry. "I hear they even have this web cam thing called skype. We could technically see each other. We could watch each other jerk off."

"Better yet, why don't you bring home some southern ho-bag and I'll watch you fuck him while I cook dinner," I snap and watch him face turn hard at the words.

"Guess that memory is a hundred percent now huh," he says dryly. "Lucky me."

I stand up and start gathering my discarded clothing, putting it on as I find it. He sighs loudly.

"Justin."

"I should go back to the hotel and... you know... deal with stuff." I find my shoes and shove my feet into them without my socks which are God knows where.

He reaches for my jacket at the same time I do. He gets the collar and I grab an arm and neither of us will let go. I stand there staring down at his naked form, his hand firmly clamped around my jacket.

"I would have thought that you'd have matured in the last five years," he snaps angrily. "You're acting like a child. You need to think about this rationally."

"You want rational?" I ask my voice high and anything but rational. "My mother and you rationally decided what to do with my life 5 years ago, and now... now that I have back my memories and I know exactly what I want. *Who* I want. Now I think it would be irrational to waste any time being away from that. From *you*."

He stares at me looking suddenly overwhelmed and I wonder if we're on the same page. If we would ever be. Sure I didn't want Aiden – not like I wanted Brian – but I did want the type of life I created with him. The relationship. The commitment. It suddenly felt like that might be the furthest thing from Brian's head.

"But clearly *you* don't feel the same," I continue and yank the jacket from his grasp.

"Justin I didn't say--"

"Clearly *you* haven't had enough time away from me yet," I bark and fight a losing battle to keep my voice cold and hard, not weak and broken like I feel. "So I guess I'll see ya in a few months Brian. Maybe."

I storm out and slam the door behind me. He never even got off the fucking floor.

I'm still furious when I get back to the hotel. I find my mother and Aiden together in my suite despite my incessant prayers on my way home that they would both be out.

My mood gets worse.

They stare at me in silence. It's that kind of all-encompassing awkward silence that lets you know your presence halted whatever conversation had been taking place.

I glare from one to the other. "What?"

Aiden shakes his head. My mother averts her eyes,

"You guys want to talk about me, you can. I know my behavior seems irrational and rude," I tell them as I rip my jack off and angrily throw it toward a chair. "You both have every right to hate me. Or yell at me. So please feel free."

Neither say a word.

"Fine," I say, almost disappointed with their civility. "I'm showering."

I storm past them both.

Aiden is the first to join me. I knew one, if not both, would follow me.

We stare at each other for a long moment. I'm surprised to realize he doesn't look angry. I figured he'd look angry. Or devastated. But he looks neither.

"Were you with Brian?"

I nod and pull my shirt over my head. I keep my eyes glue to the floor.

"Are you sleeping with him?"

There's no pain in his voice. There's no anger. No judgment. I get the sense he already knows the answer but just wants to have me say it - own up to it.

"Yes," I reply and finally force myself to look at him. "I'm sorry. I know I've hurt you."

He nods curtly. "You're sorry you hurt me, but not sorry you did it."

I nod again even though it's a statement and not a question.

He looks... defeated. I feel... like a total asshole.

"I'm going back to New York," Aiden tells me and I nod.

"So am I," I explain and he gives me a puzzled look after which I add. "It's complicated."

“That’s too bad,” He steps towards me and kisses my cheek. It’s light but he lingers a moment.

I reach out and touch the side of his face and the next thing I know we’re hugging. Holding each other tightly, wordlessly. I feel his lips pressed softly against my shoulder and I press mine to his cheek.

“I’m sorry,” I say finally in a choked voice. “I hate hurting you.”

“You have to do what you have to do,” Aiden says simply. “But I think you’re making a mistake. He let you go Justin. He didn’t fight for you when he had the chance. You deserve someone who would stick by you through thick and thin – like I did.”

He steps away and walks to the door that leads back into the main part of the hotel suite and walks out without another word.

I hesitate but follow him and catch him, bag over his shoulder, hugging my mother good-bye.

And then, without even a look in my direction, he leaves.

My mother turns to me, disappointment covering her features.

And for the first time since I arrived in Pittsburgh- since I saw Brian’s face in that darkened parked car – I feel panic. I feel like maybe I’m making the biggest mistake of my life.

“You think I should run after him don’t you?” I ask her even though I’m sure of what her answer will be.

She shakes her head. “No. I’m just sorry he’s hurting. He’s a great guy. I liked him.”

“But... you don’t think I should run after him?”

She looks even more disappointed as she sighs and says. “Brian Kinney is the only man you’ve ever loved. And I know now that what I did only delayed the inevitable.”

She sniffs a little before finally breaking down completely. I step toward her and pull her into my arms. No matter what she did, she’s my mom and she loves me. I know she was only trying to help me and to see her cry... breaks my heart.

“I’m sorry Justin,” she sobs into my shoulder.

“It’s okay mom,” I soothe her. “Maybe Aiden is right for me. I’m beginning to think Brian doesn’t love me like I love him.”

She pulls back, wipes her eyes and motions for me to sit down.

“Justin, there’s some things you should know.”

## Chapter 18

I feel sick. My heart is racing a mile a minute, my hands are shaky and I'm pretty sure it's because what I am about to do goes against every single self-preservation instinct in my entire body.

It's the equivalent of an arachnophobe locking themselves in a room full of spiders.

Doing this... it's the most terrifying thing I have ever done. But... I have no choice.

I can't let him leave.

Not again.

I park in the visitor lot of the hotel and rush on wobbly legs towards the lobby and the concierge. I have no idea what room he's in – or how I'm going to get someone to tell me. But I have to try.

It took me about 60 seconds after he left to realize what a complete asshole I was. What a giant mistake I was making.

I watched him slam the door, then flopped back on the cushions and tried to light another smoke. My head was playing the same old broken record.

*He'll calm down eventually. He's being immature. He's going to need his space to deal with everything. I've been slacking at Vanguard and now that everything is settling down I'll need to focus on that for a while.*

But my hands were shaking so bad as I tried to light the smoke I finally had to give up. I stood up and walked to the liquor cart.

*"I think it would be irrational to waste any time being away from that. From you."*

The Crown Royal bottleneck was clanking harshly against the crystal tumbler as I tried to pour it so I discarded the glass and drank directly from the bottle.

The liquor burned its way into my belly but did nothing to quell my jack-rabbitting heart.

Suddenly my mantra - the rationale for why I was letting him walk away again. Why I was distancing myself – seemed completely irrational.

I pictured myself waking up in this loft tomorrow - without him - and my chest ached.

That's when I grabbed a pair of jeans, a crumpled white T-shirt and my car keys.

And now here I am waiting impatiently behind some guy checking out feeling more terrified and more lost than I ever have in my life.

What if he turns me away?

What if he reconciled with Aaron?



What if Jennifer convinced him once and for all I was a mistake?

The guy talking to the concierge in front of me finally turns to leave.

I freeze – mouth hanging open, arms limp at my side.

He gives me the once over and then smiles softly. “Congratulations.”

I blink. “On what?”

“On finally growing the balls to fight for him.”

I say nothing. I just stare at Justin’s New York boyfriend in silence.

Guilty, awkward silence.

He moves slightly to the left as a larger middle age woman makes her way to the concierge and I follow him. Although I have no fucking clue why.

“That is why you’re here, right?” he asks me and cocks his head. It is a very pretty head. Justin has good taste. “To fix whatever you said or did earlier tonight. To tell him you want him to stay here and not go back to New York?”

I clear my throat.

“I’m not sure why I’m here,” I admit. “But I do know I’m not going to ask him to do anything. I want him to do what he wants, not what I want.”

He rolls his pretty, almond shaped eyes that as a less pretty version of my own. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Excuse me?!”

“He loves you,” he tells me even though his features are a mask of pain. “He has always loved you even when he didn’t remember who the fuck you were. So don’t deny him the opportunity to hear you tell him that you feel the same way.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t feel the same way.”

He makes a face like a teacher who is trying to teach a really stupid kid.

“But you haven’t told him that you do feel the same way, have you?” he demands and repositions his bag on his shoulder. “If you’re not man enough to tell him that. To tell him you want him now and that you’ve always wanted him ... then you’re a fucking idiot.”

He starts to walk past me and I grab his arm and spin him back. He looks shocked and maybe even a little scared.

Granted, I don’t appreciate some random guy from New York telling me I’m an idiot but I’m not going to haul off and hit him or anything.

I take a deep breath.

“You’re probably the safer bet,” I tell him honestly. “The smarter choice.”

“Yeah,” he admits with a curt nod. “But true love can be pretty fucking stupid.”

He gently pulls his arm back and lets out a defeated sigh.

“I’m not what Justin wants. He wants you.”

“I’m sorry Aiden.”

“No you’re not,” he smirks at me. “And I wouldn’t be either if he had chosen me.”

I smirk back.

“He’s in room 1427.”

He turns and I stand motionless and watch him disappear through the front doors.

I start quickly towards the elevators. I punch the UP button and seconds later I hear a ding and turn toward the elevator to my left... just as Justin steps off.

He darts out of the elevator, ready to start running, and slams right into me.

We stare at each other shocked. He’s breathing heavy trying to catch his breath.

I can’t breath at all.

“Are you... looking for Aiden?” I can barely form the words.

He looks confused for a second and then, thankfully, shakes his head.

“No. He left. We ended things.”

I nod.

Silence.

A couple scurries past us, giggling and holding hands, and steal our elevator.

“I was on my way back to your place,” he confesses in a rush of words.

“Why? I was an asshole.”

He nods and then grins. It’s unexpected and it takes my breath away.

“Your bad attitude never stopped me before.”

“Yeah. Thankfully,” I reach out and grab his T shirt and pull him into my chest.

He buries his head in my shoulder and holds onto my waist.

I circle his shoulders with my arms and bury my nose in his hair and breath in his scent.

My heart finally slows down.

My limbs regain their strength.

“I don’t want to lose you again,” I whisper into the mass of blonde hair.

“Good.”

An elevator opens with a ding to my left and Jennifer steps out. We make eye contact and I pull away from her son.

She smiles but turns her eyes to Justin.

“See,” she says as her son glances at her over his shoulder. “I told you.”

She nods to me and continues out toward the lobby exit, her deep purple suitcase rolling along behind her.

I glance down at Justin and he takes my hand and leads me into the open elevator.

He presses the button for the 14 floor as he begins to explain.

“She told me everything,” he says as the doors close and we’re alone and chugging upwards. “She told me how you were at the hospital every night. How you begged her not to take me at first. How you... fell apart after I was gone. How she had to send you updates...”

I start to feel panic again.

My eyes dart to the floor of the elevator as my heart starts to hammer again and my mouth goes dry.

“Brian...”

“I let her take you because I couldn’t help you,” I say in a hoarse whisper. “They told me. Everyone told me you couldn’t be helped. That a new life was the only way.”

“I know,” he steps closer to me and wraps his arms around my waist again.

He fits so fucking perfectly in my arms.

I turn my head slightly and capture his lips, my left hand snaking up to wrap my fingers in his hair and cup the back of his neck.

He sighs into my mouth as he tongue moves to cover my own.

He tastes like peppermint. Only sweeter.

The kiss deepens and I feel his prick hardening against my thigh.

I pull my lips a few inches from his and keep my eyes close as I whisper. “I’ve never stopped wanting you.... Not once this entire time.”

“Mmm...”

My eyes flutter open and I pull back farther and hold the sides of his face in my hands.

He stares up at me with his cobalt eyes filled with lust.

“You’re all I will ever want,” I promise and it’s easier than I thought it would be.

To tell him. To let go and ... give him my heart.

He kisses me again. Slowly. Softly.

I melt into him and, heart-hammering, fear running through my veins... I say it.

“I love you.”

His breath stops completely and I feel his body go rigid.

But I don't feel terrified anymore. I feel ridiculously peaceful. Euphoric. Free.

His eyelids flicker open again to reveal tears glistening in his eyes and he tries to smile through the shock as he touches my face with his pale hand.

“I love you too.”

*end*